

2006

# A Comparative Analysis of Intergenerational Communication in the Workplaces of the United States

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**A Comparative Analysis of Intergenerational Communication  
in the Workplaces of the United States**

**By**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Corporate and Public Communication

Seton Hall University

2006

## ABSTRACT

The workplaces in the United States today are shaped by the effects of globalization, economics and technology. These factors have all contributed to the increase of diversity among an organization's employees, be it ethnic, religious, gender, educational, social and economic, and another important element: age.

A subject growing in popularity in the broader category of interpersonal communication studies is intergenerational communication, which examines how people born during different time periods will interact with each other. Often, the events, social trends and learned behaviors from an individual's childhood will influence their communication styles, preferences and attitudes as adult workers.

Intergenerational communication has become the focus of researchers, journalists and business managers as a watershed moment occurs in the United States. For the first time in this century, four generations—the Veterans, the Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y—are working alongside each another, each with their own sets of beliefs, goals and expectations.

As Baby Boomers plan to remain in the workplace past the typical retirement age of 65, and as the new workers from Generation Y begin their careers, there exists potential for communication conflict between the two groups. Clashes at work impact more than just the manager-worker relationship; they can affect fellow workers, project teams, morale, performance, and an organization's bottom line.

The purpose of this study is to examine how Baby Boomers and Generation Y communicate in their workplaces, and if and how their communication styles and patterns might be affected by their age and experiences.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The workplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century looks like none other. Globalization, economics and technology have all contributed to the increase of diversity in the workplaces of the United States. This diversity includes ethnicity, religion, gender, education, social and economic class, and another important element: age (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 1).

There is significant research on the subjects of gender communication (how men and women interact) and cross-cultural communication (how people from different countries and different ethnicities interact). A subject growing in popularity in the broader category of interpersonal communication studies is intergenerational communication, which examines how people born during different time periods will interact with each other. Often, the events, social trends and learned behaviors from an individual's childhood will influence their communication styles, preferences and attitudes as adult workers.

Intergenerational communication has become the focus of researchers, journalists and business managers as a watershed moment occurs in the United States. For the first time in this century, four generations—the Veterans (born between 1922 and 1946), the Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1964 and 1979) and Generation Y (born between 1980 and 2000)—are working alongside each another, each with their own sets of beliefs, goals and expectations.

According to Reynolds (2005), the Veterans comprise 5 percent of the current workforce; Baby Boomers account for 43 percent; Generation X comprises 42 percent; followed by Generation Y at 10 percent.

What circumstances have led to this situation? Piktialis (2004) notes “The baby boomer generation...shows no signs of quitting. In fact, report after report indicates that boomers and veterans...will work past their 60s and well into their 70s. In typical boomer style, they’re working for personal fulfillment, they’re in great health and there are few incentives to retire early.”

Better health care, technology that allows people to work from nearly any place in the world (including their homes), financial necessity and the desire to stay active will keep older generations in the workforce longer. As a result, younger generations are working with colleagues from their parents and grandparents’ generations, in the same companies, on the same projects, but with vastly different life experiences that shape their viewpoints and the ways they interact with other co-workers.

### **The Study of Intergenerational Conflicts and How They Develop**

Starting in the early 1990s, researchers began to explore the repercussions of younger generations joining the older ones at work. The study of intergenerational conflict begins with a simple premise: that the era during which a person comes of age can influence their beliefs, behaviors and goals for life. Intergenerational communication studies frequently examine the people, events, and social trends that shape people early in life.

Consider some defining events for these four generations. The Veterans endured the Great Depression and World War II; the Boomers came of age during the era of space exploration, television, the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War; Generation X’s childhood was marked by Watergate, the stock market boom of the 1980’s, the new social phenomenon of “latchkey kids,” and the end of the Cold War; and the members of Generation Y have witnessed an increase in school shootings and violence, the advent of instant connectivity through cell

phones and the internet, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the era of “soccer moms” and extra curricular activities they are shuttled to by their attentive parents.

In their book *Generations at Work*, Zemke, et al. (2000) explore how the four different generations currently working side-by-side in the American workforce see the world as a result of their experiences (See Table 1.)

**TABLE 1. The Way They See The World**

	<b>Veterans</b>	<b>Baby Boomers</b>	<b>Generation X</b>	<b>Generation Y</b>
<b>General Outlook</b>	Practical	Optimistic	Skeptical	Hopeful
<b>Work ethic</b>	Dedicated	Driven	Balanced	Determined
<b>Viewpoint of authority</b>	Respectful	Love/hate	Unimpressed	Polite
<b>Prefer leadership by</b>	Hierarchy	Consensus	Competence	Pulling together
<b>Relationships marked by</b>	Personal sacrifice	Personal gratification	Reluctance to commit	Inclusiveness
<b>Turnoffs</b>	Vulgarity	Political incorrectness	Cliché, hype	Promiscuity

(Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 155).

The communication researchers take this a step further and examine just how these events might influence the way people speak, use technology, make decisions, resolve conflict, and non-verbally communicate with each other.



When considering diversity in the workplace, it's as important to consider a person's age just as much as his or her ethnicity, gender or education level. Understanding this can help determine what may be the preferred communication patterns and perspectives of that person.

### **Baby Boomers and Generation Y: Their Experiences and Expectations**

The end of World War II ushered in the Baby Boom generation. Today, "at 78 million strong, they are the largest generation and make up the current workforce majority...Baby Boomers are optimistic workaholics striving for 'self-realization'" (Hatfield, 2002).

When Baby Boomers were growing up, fathers went to work and mothers stayed at home. "Dinner included a well-balanced meal and time spent with the family. Prayer was allowed in school and Elvis Presley made Boomers swoon. They grew up in a time when America was a land filled with brave, proud and hardworking people" (Hatfield, 2002).

William Strauss and Neil Howe, who have researched the influences and actions of generations dating back to the Puritans in America, said in their book *Generations* (1991, p. 299-300) that the Boomers "have always seen their mission not as constructing society, but of justifying, purifying, even *sanctifying* it."

Two generations later, the Boomers' children, or Generation Y, are armed with iPods, laptops and cell phones that can be used to talk, send text messages, send instant messages, surf the internet, check e-mail, take photos, and shop, sometimes simultaneously. Members of Generation Y live in a "real-time" world and have short attention spans (Pekala, 2001). "An estimated three to five percent of the [Generation Y] school age population are affected by Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (*Professional Group for Attention and Related Disorders, 1991*)" (Hatfield, 2002).

Generation Y is nearly as large as the Baby Boom generation, with approximately 68 million members (Hatfield, 2002). They are the newest entrants to the workforce, and hold new attitudes, values and beliefs. They have been described as “better educated, more creative and far more techno-savvy than those who have come before them. Employers can expect them to refuse to blindly conform to traditional standards and time-honored institutions” (Hatfield, 2002).

In their book *Generations at Work*, Zemke, et al. (2000) note Generation Y’s optimism, desire for parental approval, and “new easy attitudes toward gender stereotyping and their place in time and space.” Gen Y is described as “the smartest, cleverest, healthiest, most-wanted *Homo sapiens* to have ever walked the face of the earth” (Zemke, et al., 2000).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Today’s organizations will have to consider how generational gaps may affect communication as the Baby Boomers and members of Generation Y join forces at work. How will Generation Y handle working on long-term projects? Will they be able to sit in meetings with Baby Boomer managers and not be checking their email every few minutes? Will they be willing or able to address conflicts in person or do it from a computer or other mobile technology? Will Baby Boomers be able to keep up with Gen Y’s pace? Will they try to impose “their way of doing things?”

Intergenerational conflict amounts to more than a member of Generation Y thinking their parents are “uncool” or not being able to relate to the time of black and white television sets. It’s more than Baby Boomers not knowing how to text message their teams at work.

With the Boomers staying in the workplace longer, and as Generation Y begins their careers, the relationships between these two groups will change from a family or social setting to

a more professional, and in some cases, more structured relationship. A new set of rules exists for communication at work, different from those at school, on the ball field, or in their homes. Clashes at work have the potential to impact more than just the manager-worker relationship; they can affect fellow workers, project teams, morale, performance, and the company's bottom line.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the Baby Boomers and Generation Y communicate in their workplaces, and if and how their communication styles and patterns might be affected by their age and experiences.

This study is timely because many Baby Boomers, the largest generation in the United States today, are postponing retirement. As the Boomers are set to remain in their jobs longer, Generation Y has entered the workforce, with their own skills, values and goals.

The Society of Human Resource management (SHRM), an industry trade group, surveyed human resources professionals in 2004 on the topic of intergenerational conflict in the workplace. More than a quarter of the survey's respondents said they have seen tensions between workers of different generations increase in the past five years, and about one-third said they expect intergenerational tensions in the workplace to increase in the next five years (Schramm, 2004).

Intergenerational conflict in the workplace has been covered in books, magazines and national newspapers. In November 2005, the topic was featured in stories in *Newsweek* magazine, *The Boston Globe*, and *USA Today*. A Google search using the terms "intergenerational conflict" registered 1,350,000 hits. Additional research on the topic found that it was covered by numerous industries, including: accounting, furniture, interior design, healthcare, education, government, marketing and personal finance. Companies and workers

throughout the United States are paying attention as the scope of the issue becomes more evident and relevant.

In recent months, the author has heard family, friends and colleagues from the Boomer and Y generations talk about each other's differences in communication styles, and more often than not, complain about breakdowns in communication, leading to missed deadlines, higher turnover, and an unpleasant working environment.

### **Research Question**

This study will explore the question "Does age affect how Baby Boomers and Generation Y communicate in the workplace?" Since Baby Boomers are currently the largest generation in the workforce and Generation Y is the newest, the study will focus on these two groups and how they communicate with each other.

The author believes that Baby Boomers and Generation Y hold different beliefs on the role of communication and how to communicate in the workplace.

In addition, study will explore the following subsidiary questions:

1. What effects, if any, would differences in communication styles and preferences have on interpersonal relationships in the workplace?
2. If differences in communication styles and preferences exist, how can managers effectively unite the generations for positive interactions in the workplace?

### **Definitions of Terms**

For the purpose of this study:

**Generation** – 1. A group of individuals born and living about the same time. 2. A group of generally contemporaneous individuals regarded as having common cultural or social characteristics and attitudes (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000).

**Veterans** [also referred to as Matures or the Silent Generation (Zemke, et al., 2000)] are those who were born between 1922 and 1946.

**Baby Boomer** [or Boomers] – are those who were born between 1946 and 1964.

**Generation X** [or Gen X or Xers] – are those who were born between 1964 and 1979.

**Generation Y** [also referred to as Gen Y, Nexters, Echo Boomers, Next Generation, Net Generation, Yer, Millennial (Zemke, et al., 2000 and Howe and Strauss, 2000)] – are those born between 1980 and 2000. For the purpose of this study, may be abbreviated as “Generation Yer” or “Gen Yer.”

**Workplace** – a work environment in the United States that could include a non-profit, for-profit or governmental agency. It could include offices, retail stores, athletic teams, or other work environment.

**Communication Style(s)** – refer(s) to the method or methods that a person or group uses to convey information, interest, or concern to another person or group.

**Intergenerational conflict** – refers to the clash of ideas, beliefs or expectations that occurs between generations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study will be limited to members of the Baby Boom generation and Generation Y who have worked for at least six months at a U.S.-based company or organization. The author will eliminate foreign companies from the study to avoid introducing other variables, such as cultural or ethnic differences as related to communication conflicts in the workplace.

### **Summary**

Analysis of intergenerational communication in the workplace is relevant and timely, due to the number of people it will impact for at least the next decade. Baby Boomers are staying in

the workplace longer, and Generation Y is now entering the workforce to work for and with them, and in some cases to manage them. Each generation brings their own distinct experiences and expectations as they head out the door every day.

The author's research will attempt to prove that differences do exist in how these specific generations communicate with each other in the workplace.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Communication is not as simple as learning how to talk. It encompasses a wide range of experiences and learned values, many of which are shaped during a person's formative years. The type of household one grows up in, schooling, and the political, economic and social events of one's time all combine to form a powerful foundation that stays with a person throughout the rest of his or her lifetime.

Communication is also not only the spoken word. It is an entire package of what is said (the words), how it's said (inflection, tone, non-verbals, including eye contact and gestures), and where it's said (in person, on the telephone, in an e-mail message).

Given the lasting power of learned communication habits during one's early years, the research in the area of intergenerational communication often begins with establishing a history for the generations, what they experienced and learned and how it has affected their communication as adult workers.

Researchers have reported that four generations are working together in the United States today. This study will focus on the two largest groups: Baby Boomers and Generation Y. First, the literature review will examine each group, its background and influences, its behaviors and preferences at work, and its role in today's workplaces.

#### **Baby Boomers**

The Baby Boomers came of age during a time of sweeping change in the United States, change mainly due to their arrival, between the years 1946 and 1964. The American infrastructure was forced to expand rapidly to accommodate the needs of the Baby Boomers, including construction of new hospitals and schools and the expansion to suburbia. As such, this

generation held a belief in growth and expansion, even as they gathered around the latest technology, their television sets, and dreamed of the new frontiers of space.

From the late 1940s to the mid 1960s, Baby Boomers were born into traditional nuclear households, with fathers heading off to work each day while mothers stayed at home, cooked, cleaned and kept the house. In 1967, *Time* magazine bestowed its “Man of the Year” award to the Baby Boom Generation (Raines, 2003, p.14).

The formative years for the Boomers were a time of social change. Ask Baby Boomers about these events, and they are likely to register as seminal moments in their lifetimes: the assassination of President Kennedy, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the moon landing and Woodstock (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 65). Baby Boomers grew up in the era the civil rights movement, the free speech movement, the Summer of Love, and race riots in over one hundred cities (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 300).

In school and at home, the Boomers learned about teamwork—there were so many of them, nearly 80 million—they had to collaborate and cooperate. “They believed that the purpose of the world was to actively serve their needs, wants and whims, a feeling they carried into adolescence and adulthood” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 67).

The research in the area is in agreement on these basic points: Baby Boomers changed the landscape of America. Because their generation was the largest by number, they forced their surrounding world to change and accommodate them. They arrived during the era of rock and roll, space exploration and sweeping social change, where the rule was to change the rules to suit their need and desires.



Boomers learned then what have become their generation's "core values: optimism, team orientation, personal gratification, health and wellness, personal growth, youth, work, involvement" (Zemke, et al., 2000 p. 68).

Raines (2003) notes the messages that shaped the Baby Boomers: "Be anything you want to be; change the world; work well with others; live up to expectations and duck and cover" (p. 20), a reference to the war against Communism and the threat of nuclear war.

Some criticize the Baby Boomers as being too self-absorbed. "They have pursued their own personal gratification, often at a high price to themselves and others" (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 67). "Even today, they still think they're cool. And they'll never, never, grow up, grow old, or die" (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 69).

The November 14, 2005 issue of *Newsweek* magazine featured the cover story, "Ready or Not, Boomers Turn 60." A current television commercial for a financial services company plays 60s rock and roll music while the voice-over says that "a generation as unique as this one" deserves unique financial planning. The Baby Boomers, nearly 80 million strong and with their massive purchasing power, still command respect in the marketplace.

Strauss and Howe note in their book *Generations* (1991, p. 299), "As Boomers have charted their life's voyage, they have metamorphosed from Beaver Cleaver to hippie to braneater to yuppie to what some are calling 'Neo-Puritan' in a manner quite unlike what anyone, themselves included, ever expected."

### **Baby Boomers at Work**

Since they make up nearly half of the current workforce, and have gained in seniority and salary, "Baby Boomers have become the most important segment of the labor force and will

remain so for the next 20 years. They are ensconced in middle management and will have taken over the executive offices and boardroom within the next decade” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 85).

The word “workaholic” was used by many researchers in the field to describe the Baby Boomers’ work ethic. They invented the 60-hour work week, and believe “the longer the day, the higher the pay” (Hatfield, 2002).

*Newsweek’s* report on Boomers turning 60 years old noted that the Merrill Lynch New retirement survey reports that 81% of Baby Boomers will work past age 65. “‘They want the action,’ says Ken Dychtwald, president of Age Wave. ‘They don’t want to be on the sidelines’” (Adler, 2005). However, the effects are starting to show. Since joining the workforce, the average time spent at work has increased one full month per year, maintains Zemke, et al. (2000, p. 85). As the Boomers get older, many are looking beyond the office to find a more balanced lifestyle.

Boomers are also putting off retirement because many of them simply cannot afford to stop working at 65. According to Zemke, et al. (2000, p.85), one-third of Boomers would retire if they could live comfortably without their salaries, but for many, it’s not feasible. *Newsweek* reports that “three-fifths of Americans between the ages of 21 and 64 have neither an IRA nor a 401(k). And since many haven’t done any retirement planning, they will be shocked when they do” (Adler, 2005).

What are implications for the millions of younger workers trying to enter the workforce? Some say that in typical, self-centered fashion, “Boomers are blocking the upward path for the younger generations, and they don’t care” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 85).

The outlook calls for the Boomers to dominate the workplace until at least 2015. They are generally on the higher end of organizational charts, are close with executives and decision-

makers within their organizations, and use this to retain security in their current positions. “They took the adage, ‘It’s not what you know, but who you know’ and made it, if not a science, a high art form” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 88-89).

Based on their experiences and expectations, Baby Boomers bring their own set of behaviors to the workplace (See Table 2).

**TABLE 2: Baby Boomers on the Job**

<b>Assets</b>	<b>Liabilities</b>
Service oriented	Not naturally “budget minded”
Driven	Uncomfortable with conflict
Willing to go the extra mile	Reluctant to go against peers
Good at relationships	May put process ahead of result
Want to please	Overly sensitive to feedback
Good team players	Judgmental of those who see things differently; self centered

(Zemke, et al., 2000, p.76).

While they are at work, Boomers like to be validated by their managers. Some messages that motivate them are: “You’re important to our success.” “You’re valued here.” “Your contribution is unique and important.” “We need you.” “I approve of you.” “You’re worthy.” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 77).

The research shows that Boomers are optimistic and hold high opinions of themselves and their contributions. But ask their colleagues for their opinions about Baby Boomers and you are likely to hear the older Veterans Generation say, “They talk about things they ought to keep

private and they are self-absorbed.” A member of Generation X might say, “They are self-righteous, workaholics, too political. What’s the management fad this week?” And finally, Generation Y, the children of the Baby Boomers feel, “They’re cool. They work too much.” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p.89).

But no matter what others may think, Boomers are a force to be reckoned with, as the research on the topic asserts. Boomers created the rules for their own benefit, they know whom to call to get things done, they are comfortable in their positions at work, and they look to be staying there for the foreseeable future.

### **Generation Y**

Generation Y is growing up in families that, despite their similar focus on children, have little in common with the Baby Boomers. Many children in this generation grew up in single-parent households, with fathers not coming home from work to join the family at the dinner table. “This is the first generation of American children to grow up without expectations of a strong nuclear family. It just isn’t on their radar screens” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 135).

While the Boomers enjoyed their new televisions sets, Generation Y is the first to be born into homes with technologies that Boomers could only dream of during their childhood.

These beeper-wearing cyberjunkies consider microwaves, CD players, VCRs and computers as basic to home furnishings as other generations did the kitchen table. “For them, technology is as natural as air,” says Frank Gregorsky... They were weaned on video games, they’re doing their term papers in full video, they troubleshoot the computers at home, and they teach their parents how to surf the Internet. Their connectedness has given them a new orientation in space and time. They have pen pals in Asia, and they see the world as global, connected, and round the clock (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 136).

Like the Baby Boomers, Generation Y can point to several events during their young lifetimes that could define their generation. Raines (2003) asserts “The catalyzing event for the Millennial Generation—the moment in history that occurred when they were all tots and teens,

and that they'll remember in vivid detail until they're in their nineties—is 9/11.” The terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001 will stay with Generation Y as the Kennedy assassination did for their Baby Boomer parents. In the same way that the events of their time shaped the perspectives of the Boomers, September 11, 2001 “sparked a rebirth of heroism and civic pride in the U.S.” (Raines, 2003, p.16).

After September 11, 2001, school focused on teaching respect for diversity. “Millennial children were ripe for this message; they were already growing up with a more routine exposure to multiculturalism than any generation before them” (Raines, 2003, p.17). This exposure will help shape their comfort level when interacting with others in the global, borderless world of work.

While September 11, 2001 was certainly a defining moment for Generation Y, they have lived through other political and social events that will become a part of their foundations: the Oklahoma City bombing; school violence, including the Columbine High School massacre; and the Monica Lewinsky scandal that tarnished President Bill Clinton’s administration (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 129).

Like the Boomers, there are certain messages that resonate with Generation Y: “Be smart—you are special.” “Leave no one behind.” “Connect 24/7.” “Achieve now!” “Serve your community” (Raines, 2003, p. 20). These are ideologies that Generation Y learned at home and in school, and they’ll take them along as they begin their careers.

Despite the addition of technology and the rapid pace of change it brings, Generation Y “starts to look a lot like a modern, new-fangled version of their World War II grandparents and great-grandparents” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 138). Strauss and Howe agree, “There’s a social role available to [Generation Y] because the Veteran generation is dying. That creates a

yearning on the part of society for a return to what is missing...for someone to fill the vacuum” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 139).

### **Generation Y at Work**

This group of young people is the newest addition to the workforce today. Like the generations before them, Generation “Yers” bring their own perspectives and expectations to the workforce. In an interview reported in *American Demographics*, Generation Yers were asked, “What makes a good boss?” The reply: “One that empowers those beneath them; gives a lot of flexibility.” Asked, “Are you loyal to the company?” the response was, “Loyalty is not measured in the number of years you are with a company, it’s based on the honesty and respect that exists between people you work with.” Asked “What did you learn from your parents?” the Generation Yer replied, “They taught me never to bring business home with you unless you have to. Enjoy work for what it is, but don’t let it rule your life” (Gardyn, 2000). Boomers may be passing on the lessons they learned later in life to their young children, but it is unclear how they will react when Generation Y takes their advice and adapts them to their first days on the new job.

Researchers have determined that Generation Y, as other generations, will carry have their own attitudes and abilities to their workplaces (See Table 3).

**TABLE 3: Generation Y on the Job**

<b>Assets</b>	<b>Liabilities</b>
Collective action	Need for supervision and structure
Optimism	Inexperience
Tenacity	
Heroic spirit	
Multitasking capabilities	
Technological savvy	

(Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 144).

How do Generation Yers envision the world of work? According to the article “The Class of 2001” in *Management Review* (1999), some Yers replied, “Work will not be the highlight of the day but rather a distraction from life! I certainly see myself working in my home office. Companies will become smaller and less centralized. Fast and unlimited information transfer will make large centralized companies history.” “The work environment of my parents’ generation will probably die out...” “High-speed transport systems will give me the freedom to attend meetings halfway around the world and fly back the same day. Understanding diverse backgrounds is essential in order to have a cohesive, effective and enthusiastic group” Anonymous (1999). While they share the optimism of the Baby Boomers, the research makes the case that Generation Y will hold divergent opinions on the how work will fit into their daily lives.

What gets Generation Y moving in the workplace? They need to hear: “You’ll be working with other bright, creative people.” “You and your coworkers can help turn this company around.” “You can be a hero here.” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 145). Generation Y wants to stand up and be counted, just like their Baby Boomer parents, who are now their also managers.

In *Growing Up Digital*, Tapscott (1997) notes additional characteristics of Generation Y and how these fit into their behavior in the workplace. He notes that they have high-self esteem; are inclusive and dislike traditional hierarchies; need to express their viewpoints; have mastered the tools for collaboration with colleagues by using technology; judge others on contribution and want compensation to be based on this rather than position in the workplace hierarchy; work in a real-time world and are very comfortable doing so; and are the first generation of knowledge workers, who “will become the dominant form of capital in the workplace” (Tapscott, 1997).

Members of Generation Y have been characterized as connected, civic-minded and busy. How do other generations view them? The Veterans, their grandparents say, “They have good manners; they are smart; they watch too much TV with crude language and violence.” Baby Boomers say, “They’re cute; they need more discipline from their parents; they need to learn to entertain themselves; they need too much attention; can they do my web page for me?” And finally, those closest in age to Gen Y, the “Xers,” say, “Here we go again, another self-absorbed generation of spoiled brats.” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p.137).

The research on Generation Y at work contains a marked focus on the speed of which this group operates. Generation Xers labeled their younger colleagues as “self-assured, relentlessly sunny, multitasking young people who use warp-speed processing of information, have the need to speed through careers and self-esteem on steroids” (Mui, 2001).

Jokes about Generation Y on web pages offer tips for “dealing with the Ritalin generation.” These include posting “speed limits in hallways” and “preparing for vacation time to be accrued in nanoseconds” (Mui, 2001).

“It’s great that Gen Y thinks that all is right with the world—it makes for a nice positive attitude,” commented one manager in Mui’s 2001 article for *The New York Times*. He continued, “The problem is these are people who’ve often had it easy, and it shows.”

In the same article, another manager observed a sense of entitlement among Generation Y workers. “They all want to be challenged immediately and expect opportunities for international travel—within two months of starting work” (Mui, 2001).

The article further notes that a potential area for conflict is the youngest generation’s expectation that office cultures will adapt to them, rather than the reverse. Mui’s article reports Prof. Jay Conger from the London Business School advises Boomers who feel that Generation Y



has not yet earned status at work to “get over it. The older crowd paid their dues at a different kind of country club,” Professor Conger said. “It’s much more of a free-agent, market-oriented workplace now” Mui (2001).

Overall, the research reports that Generation Y shares attributes with the generations that came before them: the can-do attitude of the Veterans, the optimism and teamwork ethic of their Boomer parents, and the technological savvy of Generation X (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 143). “It looks like, as workers, they’ll resemble the Veterans in many ways: their belief in collective action, optimism about the future, trust in centralized authority, a will to get things done, and a heroic spirit in the face of overwhelming odds” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 143).

The accolades for Generation Y continue: they will be productive, they will be the best educated workers and they will find new and effective ways to use technology. “They seem uniquely poised to become the workforce that everyone has been looking for” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 144).

A review of related literature identifies the trends that will shape Generation Y: technology, speed, globalization and ambition. This is a group that will work hard to achieve success, but wants it in real-time and sees no obstacles, including those of time or space, which they cannot overcome.

An assessment of Baby Boomers’ and Generation Y’s childhood years will find a few similarities. But families have changed, technology has changed, the world has changed. Even so, both of these groups have shared optimism about the way the world is headed and their place in it. How they will get there, and how they will communicate along the way, are questions that intergenerational communication researchers will be focused on. If Baby Boomers and

Generation Yers can't share their dreams, ideas and perspectives with one another, the road ahead will be a bumpy one.

### **Baby Boomers and Generation Y: Working Together For the First Time**

Researchers have examined several areas to gauge how the generations will communicate at work. These include workplace etiquette; the language that each group uses; the amount of time spent at work; how they use (or don't use) technology; how they prefer to lead and be led; how they handle diversity in the workplace; and how they prefer to give and receive feedback. All of these issues relate to the topic of intergenerational communication, and the Baby Boomers and Generation Y each maintain their own viewpoints, sometimes similar, sometimes divergent, but ever-present.

### **Etiquette: "Dude, Why the Three-Piece Suit?"**

One component of interpersonal communication is situational awareness—knowing what to say, when to say it, and how to say it. Stated simply, it's etiquette. Researchers in the field of intergenerational communication have paid particular attention to this area because of the impact it can have on workplace relationships.

A research survey by Lancaster and Stillman (2002) showed that a third of respondents from all generations agreed with the statement "Someone from another generation at work offends me with something they say or do often or a lot."

In the same research, participants said the biggest etiquette offenses occurred in three areas: phone manners, forms of address and dress code. Lancaster and Stillman note, "The sad thing about these etiquette challenges is that usually people's intentions are good. As Perrin Cunningham [co-author of *Business Etiquette for Dummies*] put it, 'The whole point of etiquette

in the first place is to make people feel more comfortable in their surroundings, not less”  
(Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 312).

Lancaster and Stillman (2003) report that their survey respondents feel the basic rules of etiquette are overlooked when it comes to communications among the generations. Most people have experienced the ways the generations dismiss each other. When a Generation Yer rolls his or her eyes at a Boomer, or when a Boomer writes off a younger employee as inexperienced.

Is there a right answer? The researchers say no, and advocate flexibility and patience when determining what is proper. “Simple gestures like making eye contact, listening, acknowledging what people say, and acting on others’ suggestions are all ways to show that we value and honor another generation at work” (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 317).

### **Language: It’s More Than Just Words**

From the Boomers’ “groovy” to Generation Y’s “whatever,” the language of a particular generation can be foreign to members of another. In social settings, language gaps can be cause for amusement, education or anecdotes. In the workplace, it can cause confusion, tension and resentment.

It used to be you could never be too rich or too thin. Nowadays, you can hardly be too phat or too pimp. Technology, popular culture, and the media are changing not just the ways we communicate, but the words we use. It’s tough to know where the language is going next. And without a clear understanding, the etiquette equation only gets more complicated (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 316).

In their research, Lancaster and Stillman recount the story of a Generation Y web site designer, who received low marks on his otherwise stellar performance review for referring to women as “dude.” “What’s wrong with ‘dude’? he wanted to know. “That means I like them!” Well I don’t think these young wom....girls....uh, ladies, will appreciated being likened to uh, dude, but the point is, these are your professional co-workers and need to be treated as such,”

came the manager's uncomfortable reply. "Whatever," was the younger worker's response (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 315).

Raines (2003) notes the language that Baby Boomers and Generation Yers respond to. (See Table 4.)

**TABLE 4: Persuasive language for the generations**

<b>Baby Boomer</b>	<b>Generation Y</b>
Consensus	Achievement
Human rights	Challenge
Involvement	Collaborate
Relationship	Community
Team	Discovery
Tolerance	Future
Trust	Goals
Democratic	Fun
Equal; fair	Positive
Humane	Come together
Interpersonal	Overcome cutting edge

(Raines, 2003, p. 55-57).

Raines also notes not to be brusque, unfriendly or engage in one-upmanship when communicating with Boomers, and not to be cynical, sarcastic or condescending when speaking with Generation Y (2002, p. 58-59).

The simple act of asking members of other generations for the meanings of the words they use is an invitation to communicate. "The meanings each generation assigns to words provide snapshots of the events and conditions that shaped a generation's values and attitudes, which are the foundation for how each of us behaves on the job and in our everyday lives" (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 317).

But even inquiring minds can run into pitfalls. If one uses language that they don't understand just to fit in, they will probably end up standing out even more. "Nothing is more annoying than a generational impostor. There's a huge difference between understanding another generation's language and speaking it" (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 317).

### **Work/Life Balance: How Boomers and Gen Y Measure Their Time at Work**

As life experience, technology and economics all converge, the concept of how Boomers and Generation Yers spend each of their 24 hours has come into question.

Say the word "workaholic" and many immediately think of the Baby Boomers. For them, "the best time to leave the office is ten minutes after the boss leaves" (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 112). A large amount of face time with the boss is a cornerstone for Boomers at work. They've tended to identify themselves through their jobs and to achieve their identity by the work they perform. For this generation, "work ethic" and "worth ethic" are synonyms (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 77).

However, as they age, "many have discovered they are not nearly as ambitious as they were in previous decades" (Zemke, et al., 2002, p. 87). With aging parents and their Generation Y children requiring their chauffeur and activity-scheduling skills, Boomers have more to do in a day than ever before.

If you asked a member of Generation Y to comment on the work/life balance, he or she might say, "Work isn't everything; I need flexibility so I can balance all my activities" (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 117).

For today's Generation Y, balance is everything. "Students from elementary school through high school feel they have too little free time, not too much. Long gone are the old

Boomer days of kids coming home from school and being shooed outside ‘to play’” (Howe and Strauss, 2000, p. 168).

Today, members of Generation Y spend their afternoons getting herded from activity to activity. “I don’t have time to be a kid,” a 10-year-old told *Time* magazine (Howe and Strauss, 2000, p. 169).

“The challenge will be that Generation Y will carry over their activity-laden lives into the workplace, and like homework, the workplace will be just one of the many important activities, rather than the top priority (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 117).

In their article, *The Compassionate Organization in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Hill and Stephens (2003) support this theory. “The idea of mixing personal and professional roles together throughout the day, rather than assigning them to discrete blocks of time, has become increasingly acceptable.” They assert that the ability to cyber-commute to work will “further blur the lines between [work and social] selves.”

*The Wall Street Journal* recounted a story about a factory in Ohio where the older and younger generations clashed about the time assigned to shifts. Younger workers wanted longer shifts in order to be at the factory fewer days during the week. However, many older workers see this preference for longer shifts as just another manifestation of a weaker work ethic among the younger set. It isn’t that the younger workers want to stay on the job longer, they say; they want the bigger blocks of time off so they can play (Aeppel, 2000).

Rather than a difference in work ethics, on younger employee sees a difference between generations over how they balance their work and personal lives. Unlike many of her older colleagues, she says, this job isn’t the focus of her existence. “I’ve got a life outside of here,”

she says....She also makes it clear that she expects to occasionally enjoy herself at work (Aeppel, 2000).

However, her Baby Boomer colleague with “no life outside of work” says his reasons for being such a workaholic have less to do with his age, he says, than with position in life. “I’m divorced, the kids are grown. So I might as well work” (Aeppel, 2000).

Research in this area agrees that the Baby Boomers who work 60 hours per week will begin to slow down as they age. However, they are still committed to their face time at work. Generation Y, on the other hand, seems to prefer a workday that contrasts with their Boomer managers’ visions of 9 to 5 (or 8 to 6, as the case may be). Many Boomers put in the long hours at the office when they first began their careers. They could be disappointed if they expect their new Generation Y hires to do the same as they did.

### **Technology: “Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out” Redux**

While most Baby Boomers can recall and relate to the hippie generation mantra “turn on, tune, in drop out,” Generation Y assigns a whole new meaning to the phrase. The technology that they embrace and that encompasses their lives has them turning on technology, tuning into technology, and, some argue, dropping out of the parts of their worlds that are not connected by technology.

Technology’s impact on the workplace cannot be overstated.

TV virtually created the Baby Boom Generation. They watched all their generational events on TV—JFK’s funeral, Woodstock, Vietnam, civil rights demonstrations, the moon landing. The impact of the digital age on Generation [Y] will be immeasurably greater. For the first time in history, kids are the authority. They know far more than their parents about one of the basics. There aren’t just three Rs anymore...there’s a fourth—the Internet. And it’s as natural as breathing for Generation [Y]. It is changing the basic dynamic of families” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p.128-129).

“If ever there were an ominous chasm between generations, it’s the one between Generation Y and the Boomers” in technological savvy, maintains Zemke et al., in their 2000 book *Generations at Work* (p. 128). (See Table 5.)

**TABLE 5: Technology for the Generations**

	<b>Boomer Childhood</b>	<b>Millennial Childhood</b>
<b>Electronic Products</b>	Broadcast TV, 78s and LPs, 8mm film, vacuum tubes, mainframes	Interactive TV, streaming and MP3s, DVDs, microchips, personal computers
<b>Consumer products</b>	Made in U.S.A., sedans and station wagons, electric ranges, room fans	Global production, minivans and SUVs delivered food, climate control
<b>Public infrastructure</b>	Test satellites, B-52s, interstate highways	Space shuttles, stealth and smart bombs, the internet

(Howe and Strauss, 2000, p. 49).

Zemke, et al. note that kids today (Generation Y) have a greater understanding and comfort level with technology than their parents (Baby Boomers) do. As a result, the children are teaching their parents a thing or two. The authors liken it to learning a new language: it’s easier when you are a child, but more difficult as one becomes older. Learning it “takes so much effort that most adults choose simply not to add another language to their repertoire. The Boomer who makes that choice with technology will find they’re standing on the edge of a generation gap wider than their worst nightmares” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 129).

To add to the litany of labels assigned to them, Generation Y is often called “the connected generation,” notes Zaslow (2005). At any given moment, a Gen Yer can be found in front of a computer, sending e-mail and instant messages, listening to their iPods. “But their technology-focused lifestyle can also leave them disconnected from the wider world. It’s easier



now for kids to function in their own closed societies, leaving them oblivious to adult culture” (Zaslow, 2005).

Terms such as “techno-tasking” (Zaslow, 2005) multitasking and “context switching” (which McManus (2002) defines as “the ability to change rapidly between two or more vastly different subjects”) are all used to describe these connected children. However, some researchers see a risk with all of this connectedness. They are wary of information overload and bemoan the lack of a trusted filter to help Generation Y sort out all that they hear and see on the world wide web. “When Generation Y surfs the web and the blogs out in cyberspace, they determine for themselves what’s worth reading or believing. ‘If it’s good, they go with it. If not, they don’t. It’s called ‘Internet thinking.’ They don’t have a Walter Cronkite,” like their parents and grandparents did to help them sort it out (Zaslow, 2005).

Generation Y may resent these labels and say they are able to complete their work in a timely manner and to sort out the barrage of information on their own. But there is no arguing that technology is one area in which Baby Boomers will need to pay special attention to keep themselves on par with Gen Y.

### **Leadership & Management Styles: Watch and Learn, but Who’s Teaching Whom?**

A review of Baby Boomers and Generation Y’s preferred leadership styles will provide another lens through which to view intergenerational communication in the workplace.

Baby Boomers’ leadership style is collegial and consensual, say Zemke et al. in their book *Generations at Work* (p. 79). While Boomers encourage participation and equality in the workplace, their efforts can sometimes be described as just “lip service” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 79). Many Boomer managers are not aware of their ineffectiveness in the office. “When Scott Adams created Dilbert’s pointy-haired, cliché-spouting boss, he was modeling and mocking a

dark and very, very real side of Boomer leadership—management by buzzword” (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 79).

While the Boomers’ democratic style of management and elimination of traditional workplace hierarchies might be embraced by Generation Y, the “buzzwords” and “lip service” offered by Baby Boomer managers will not. They will look for leaders who are educational, positive and achievement-oriented as well (Raines, 2003, p. 100).

For Generation Y, the worst traits their leaders and managers can have are: “close-mindedness; ineffective delegation; lack of knowledge and organization skills; inability to train or to facilitate training; disrespect for young people; intimidating attitude; and overemphasis on outward appearance” (Martin and Tulgan, 2001, p. 45).

There have been references to Generation Yers stepping into leadership positions and managing Baby Boomers 20 who are years their senior. The 2004 movie “In Good Company” provided a glimpse into the challenges arising from this new arrangement. But no matter who leads and who follows, Boomers and Generation Yers will need to be aware of the other group’s preferences in order to get the best results from their interactions.

### **Feedback: How Boomers and Generation Y Discuss Performance**

Boomers and Generation Yers have different perceptions on the role of feedback in the workplace, and how to give and receive it. Speaking about job performance is a sensitive topic at work, and intergenerational communication conflicts have the potential to create uncomfortable situations. Each group has distinct opinions on the subject. (See Table 6.)

**TABLE 6: Viewpoints on Feedback**

<b>Baby Boomers</b>	Feedback once a year, with lots of documentation!
<b>Generation Yers</b>	Feedback whenever I want it at the push of a button.

(Adapted from Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 255).

Baby Boomers' desire for information was a necessity for survival and advancement at work. "You don't enter the work world with 80 million cohorts competing with you for the same jobs without being obsessed with knowing how you're doing. So they adopted the once-a year performance appraisal" (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 256).

With the information superhighway, Generation Y will be looking for feedback at a more constant rate than the Boomers, who were satisfied with a more formal, annual performance appraisal. They will want up to the minute feedback (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 257-258).

The generations also collide around feedback when it comes to the delivering it. Lancaster and Stillman (2002, p. 260) note that since there were so many Baby Boomers competing for jobs, they had to remain diplomatic to get work done within their teams. Therefore, they developed a non-threatening language to give feedback. "'Weaknesses' became 'areas of opportunity.' The candidate who got the promotion wasn't 'better than you,' it's just that his 'qualifications were a tighter fit for the nuances of the position.' And just to be sure they all heard the same thing, there was loads of documentation that went into the file" (Lancaster and Stillman 2002, p. 260).

Another issue for older managers to grapple with: Generation Y workers will offer their own ideas and criticisms to their bosses. They have been raised to speak up and be counted. "How many [Veterans] or Boomers were asked when they were kids to plan the family vacation or help research which car to buy? Why wouldn't Generation Yers feel it is their place to pipe

up on topics as large as strategic planning [at work]?” (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 269-270).

Will Baby Boomer managers recognize that Generation Yers want to be considered as part of the team and involved in the decision-making process? Or will they be threatened by the Yers’ ambition and see the younger group as disrespectful? The research maintains that this could be a potential area for intergenerational conflict and advise that Baby Boomers become aware of the capabilities and expectations of their new hires.

### **Diversity: It’s a Small World After All**

Technology has made the world even smaller, exposing workplaces to more cultures, ideas and time zones than ever before. This increase in diversity has the potential to be another area for conflict in the intergenerational organizations of today.

When Boomers began entering the workforce, the women’s and civil rights movements were helping to expand the definition of diversity and include equality for women and people of color (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 321).

But as the pace of change increased since the Boomers’ youth, diversity in the workplace, in all its forms, has moved at warp speed. Consider this: “Generation Y is traveling first class via the World Wide Web and is talking to citizens in all corners of the globe. Imagine what this does to this newest generation’s definition of diversity” (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 321).

While Veterans, Boomers and Xers have learned to truly accept diversity as a natural way of doing business, Generation Y is beyond accepting diversity; this is a generation of future workers that will expect it. They will not limit diversity to just race, ethnicity or even sex anymore, they will also define diversity by thinking style, educational background, geographic location, generation, avocation, lifestyle, sexual orientation, work experience, and more (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 322).

Morton (2002) asserts that Generation Y's "exposure to a variety of global viewpoints has created a "global sense of 'mix and match' culture. "It's changed their sense of what they have permission to do, where they look for cultural styles, their whole sense of possibility" (Paul, 2001).

Baby Boomers came of age during a time of social revolution, and began to accept more than just white males in the workforce. However, globalization and technology have impacted the current landscape of work. Some Boomers are managing employees from countries that may not have been on the map when they were youngsters. As Generation Y is more comfortable with diversity and sees the value it can bring to the workplace, Boomers may find themselves learning from their young team members.

### **Pulling Back the Curtain: What a Boomer and Generation Yer**

#### **Say About Their Workplaces**

Considering all the facets of communication in the workplace, what does it look like when they are all put together during the course of the workday?

A Baby Boomer that the author spoke with described her intergenerational interactions in the office as generally polite. However, she noted that "when working with younger (mid/late 20's) associates I often get the impression that they are far more casual about their dedication to work and much less willing to 'go the extra mile' for our company. They do not like to be inconvenienced. With that in mind, I may interact with them a bit differently (i.e., more clearly articulate the needs/demands of the job)."

This Boomer executive feels that age affects her communication with others at work. She said, "Younger people have a tendency to prefer electronic communication instead of face-to-face interaction. They don't seem to appreciate the value of building relationships through

direct contact. Also, my experience is that they communicate less aggressively, i.e., don't follow up as quickly or often to resolve an issue."

"I also feel that use of e-mail reduces the effectiveness of their communication and compromises their willingness and/or ability to resolve conflicts. Older people use e-mail as a direct, efficient way to respond. Generally, I feel they are more inclined to face-to-face discussions, particularly in matters of importance or potential conflict."

"Older people are threatened by anyone who is more technologically savvy. In my case older associates with the "if it's not broken – don't fix it" attitude resented my capabilities until I proved that it was in all of our best interest to be more efficient and productive."

"The conflict with younger people comes when they rely too much on technology without the basic understanding of the work. This can be characterized by the excuse 'something must have happened to the computer.' Over-reliance on technology can result in too many mistakes. In this situation there was also an attitude of 'What's the big deal if it's wrong?' - which is unacceptable to me."

The author also interviewed a Generation Yer for her perspective on the topic. She said, "I find that in the workplace, I tend to feel stressed when interacting with co-workers who are older than me because I feel inexperienced; being new to the [financial services] industry. However, it really is not my co-workers attitudes that make me feel that way. I think that my attitude is something that I am placing on myself. When I do interact with older co-workers, I find that they tend to be very respectful and polite to me. They take the time to explain situations and issues to me rather than brushing me aside. They never really make me feel like I am young and inexperienced. However, I still feel inexperienced and I am very self-conscious about that."

“I interact well with people my age primarily because I tend to talk to them more socially rather than for work related issues. When speaking socially, the inexperienced factor does not come into play. For work related issues however I tend to direct my attention to the managers (older co-workers) rather than their staff (my peer group).

“I do feel that age affects the ways in which people communicate at work. I feel that being a young woman in the financial industry, you really have to prove yourself in order to be respected and taken seriously. I do see a difference from when I first started at this company and now. In the beginning, I believe I was perceived as young and irresponsible solely due to my age. I was 23 when I started here and much younger than those I interacted with on a daily basis. I always felt generalized as a kid, for lack of a better word. I felt like when I spoke people just did not get what I was saying or just did not care because of my inexperience. Now, at 25, I learned that you can break down the communication gap between groups of different ages. I believe part of it is that the 20-somethings need to prove themselves and their skills in the workplace. I think it becomes much easier to speak to others once you have proven your skills because the OTHER person is more willing to hear what you have to say. They no longer view you as young and inexperienced because you are beginning to show how you handle yourself professionally.”

Both the Boomer manager and the Generation Y worker feel committed to their work. But they have separate opinions on the how to interact with others and what their expectations are. Based on the literature reviewed for this study, it appears that these experiences reflect what has been previously recorded.

### **The Organization's Role in Improving Intergenerational Communication**

An organization's failure to address intergenerational communication conflict and its effects "may lead to problems in retention and recruitment and ultimately reduced productivity" (Leuenberger and Kluver, 2003).

Some of the literature offers management tips, activities, games and training to introduce employees to the topic and to help them bridge the gaps.

Raines' 2003 book, *Connecting Generations: The Sourcebook for a New Workplace*, offers methods to get organizations moving in this direction, including: creating a Generational Awareness Week; reviewing the company's benefits package and identifying rewards valued by each generation; seeking out a person from another generation to learn about his or her history, language and work preferences (p. 7).

Organizations cannot bear all of the responsibility for employees' learning about the people they work with. For more personal growth, Raines promotes using "The Titanium Rule," adapted from "The Golden Rule" (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) to better suit today's multi-generational workplaces. The Titanium Rule asks individuals to "do unto others, keeping their preferences in mind" (Raines, 2003, p. 34). How does a busy employee learn about others' preferences? She advises observing colleagues' clothing, level of eye contact, gestures, if they keep a neat or messy office, their body language, the tempo of their speech, how they begin conversations, and word choice (Raines, 2003, p. 39).

Maher reported in her 2003 article for *The Wall Street Journal* that consulting firm Deloitte & Touche LLP instituted a reverse-mentoring program in 2001. An elderly employee reported that the program helped him expand his Internet proficiency and get a better handle on



the daily torrent of e-mail. He even got constructive criticism on his own management style. “It turns into a mutual mentoring,” he said (Maher, 2003).

As more and more Generation Yers enter the workforce, book shelves and the internet are being lined with books, reports, facts and tips on how to bridge the generation gaps in the workplace. This is a discipline that will be analyzed extensively throughout the next decade.

### **The Dissenter: Intergenerational Communication = Inaccurate, Irrelevant, Illogical**

While a clear majority of the literature reviewed in this chapter attests to the existence of intergenerational communication conflict and the urgency to address it, there are those who disagree. The author found one instance in the course of the research.

Pruitt (2002) argues “the literature on generational personality is replete with stereotypes...and they go unchallenged.” He asserts that there is inconsistency among researchers in the field on the descriptions and labels applied to the various generations. “Who is right?” Pruitt asks. “Is it even relevant?”

He notes there are “gaps in the logic” of assigning a “generational personality” to individuals. For example, he cites descriptions of “Generation X written in 2001 that are similar to those written about teenagers in the late 1960s as reported by the media of that time.” Both articles used similar terminology to describe the youth of each group. Pruitt argues that “This only tells us how young people are sometimes perceived, not about a generational personality.”

He further argues that “The generational personality is unproven and the evidence that it exists is anecdotal and subjective.” He advises HR managers “to regard astonishing the claim that it is more challenging than race or gender, and they should not burden diversity programs, benefit design, management training or other HR programs with this notion.”

### Summary

With four generations joined together at the same time in the workplaces of the United States, the study of intergenerational communication is critical for new employees (Generation Y) and seasoned executives (Baby Boomers) alike.

The authors Howe and Strauss have collaborated on four books on the topic of generations in the United States (*Generations*, *13<sup>th</sup> Gen*, *The Fourth Turning*, *Millennials Rising*) and conducted groundbreaking work in the field of generational studies. From there, Zemke, Raines and Filipczak and Lancaster and Stillman followed their lead and added the interpersonal communication element and the effects on the workplace. It was further noted there were many cross-references among those authors in their own works. Zemke, et al. interviewed Strauss and Howe for their book; Raines was a collaborator on one and also published her own works. In addition, many of the resources cited in Chapter 2 referred to the works of Howe, Strauss, Zemke, et al., and Lancaster and Stillman.

A majority of the research the author of this paper read supported the general ideas presented in Chapter II: Boomers are coming of age, but Generation Y is ready to meet them in the workplace with their own ideas and goals. Technology can still act as a wedge between the two groups, as Generation Y makes it the new way of getting work done.

The research discussed the issues included in this chapter: history of the generations; events that shaped them; workplace styles that include language, technology, diversity, feedback, management styles, and etiquette.

The research is still evolving in this field of study, as Generation Yers continue to finish school and enter the workforce in larger numbers. What is clear is that mutual understanding will be needed for the Baby Boomers and Generation Yers to work together.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The review of literature focused on several themes that could affect intergenerational communication in the workplace. To further test these conclusions, the author will conduct quantitative research using an online survey.

The survey was developed for the review and approval of Seton Hall University's Institutional Review Board in December 2005. It consists of 19 questions; 15 substantive and four demographic. The substantive questions were designed to obtain data on the subjects' perspectives and experiences in the workplace, including: intergenerational conflict and its potential effects; the use of technology; communication styles; and company resources to address intergenerational communication issues. The demographic questions seek to classify the subjects' gender, education levels, age and employment status. Twelve of the questions use the Likert scale for measurement; the others are "yes/no" or multiple choice.

The author believes that the contents of the survey will answer the research question, "Does age affect how Baby Boomers and Generation Y communicate in the workplace?" as well as the subsidiary questions:

1. What effects, if any, would differences in communication styles and preferences have on interpersonal relationships in the workplace?
2. If differences in communication styles and preferences exist, how can managers effectively unite the generations for positive interactions in the workplace?

The survey will target participants from the Baby Boom generation and from Generation Y who have been employed at a United States-based company for at least six months. Since this study will be a comparison of their particular communication styles and preferences, these two

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **SURVEY RESULTS**

The author obtained quantitative data through a survey posted on January 20, 2006 through the online service Zoomerang ([www.zoomerang.com](http://www.zoomerang.com)). The survey was open for 25 days. The author solicited respondents through e-mail invitations, which contained the link to the online survey.

The first question in the survey asked respondents to identify themselves as a member of the Veterans generation, a Baby Boomer, a member of Generation X, or a member of Generation Y. (See Appendix A Figure 15.)

The respondents numbered 206, of which 58 identified themselves as Baby Boomers and 54 as members of Generation Y. The author eliminated responses from the two other groups, the Veterans Generation and Generation X, as the study is focused on interactions between the Baby Boomers and Generation Y.

The author also only counted data from completed surveys; no partial completions were included in the final analysis.

Next, respondents were asked if they had at least 6 months of work experience at a U.S.-based company. All respondents from the Baby Boomer and Generation Y groups who selected “No” were eliminated from the final data pool.

Of the 58 Baby Boomers, four indicated that they did not have at least 6 months of work experience and five submitted incomplete responses for the survey. The author eliminated those nine responses for a final Baby Boomer pool of 49 for inclusion in the results.

From the Generation Y group, nine respondents indicated that they did not have at least 6 months of work experience and three submitted incomplete responses. The author eliminated those 12 for a total of 42 to be included in the results.

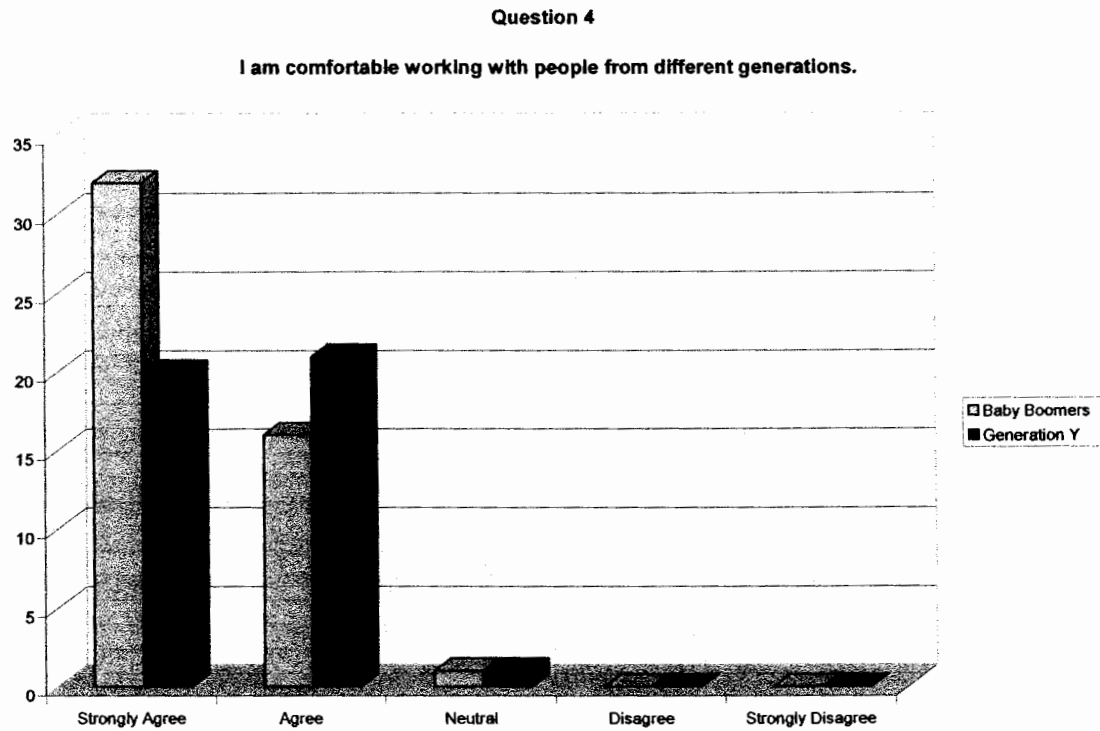
Question 3 asked the respondents if they have interacted with people from different generations than their own. If there were negative responses, they too would have been eliminated; however, all respondents replied “Yes” to this question.

The final number for usable responses was 91, slightly less than the desired response rate of 100.

The last two questions of the survey were demographic. Question 18 asked for the respondents’ education levels. Nine Baby Boomers indicated their highest level of education was high school; 12 selected college as their highest level; and 28 chose graduate level. Generation Y respondents included one with high school as the highest level of education; 24 with college; and 17 for the graduate level. (See Appendix A Figure 16.)

The final question asked for the gender of the respondents. The Baby Boomers who responded included 17 males and 32 females. From the Generation Y pool, 15 were male and 27 were female. (See Appendix A Figure 17).

The survey contained 14 additional substantive questions, which will be reported in this chapter.



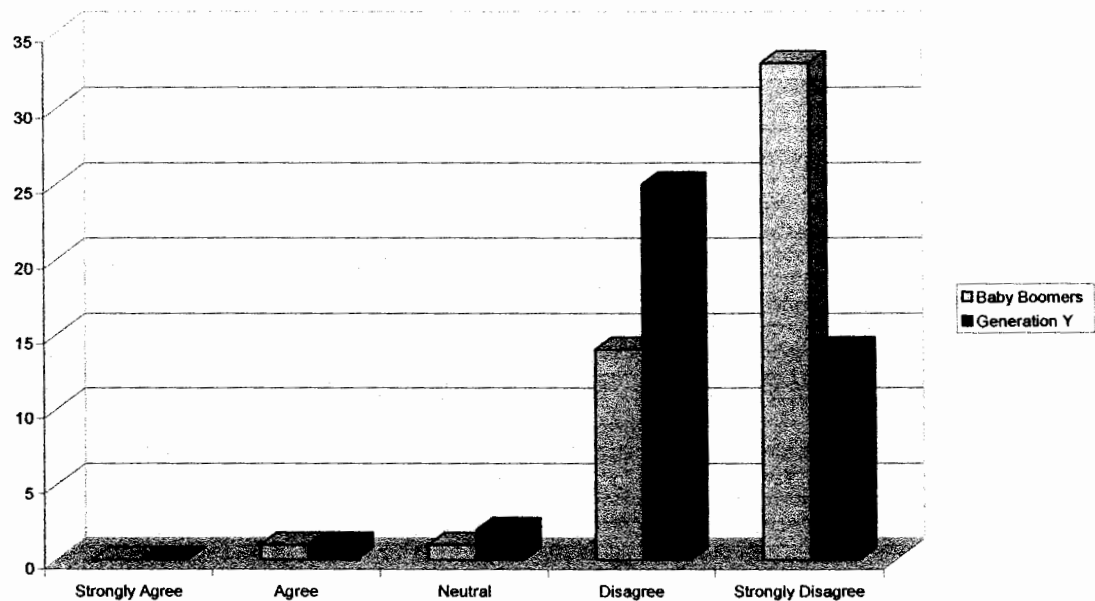
**Figure 1.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	32	16	1	0	0
Generation Y	20	21	1	0	0

Most respondents agreed with this statement. Sixty five percent of the Baby Boomers and 48% of Generation Yers strongly agreed; 33% of Baby Boomers agreed, as did 50% of Generation Yers. Two percent of the Baby Boomers and 2% of Generation Yers were neutral. No respondents indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

## Question 5

When possible, I avoid interacting with people at work who are not in my age group.



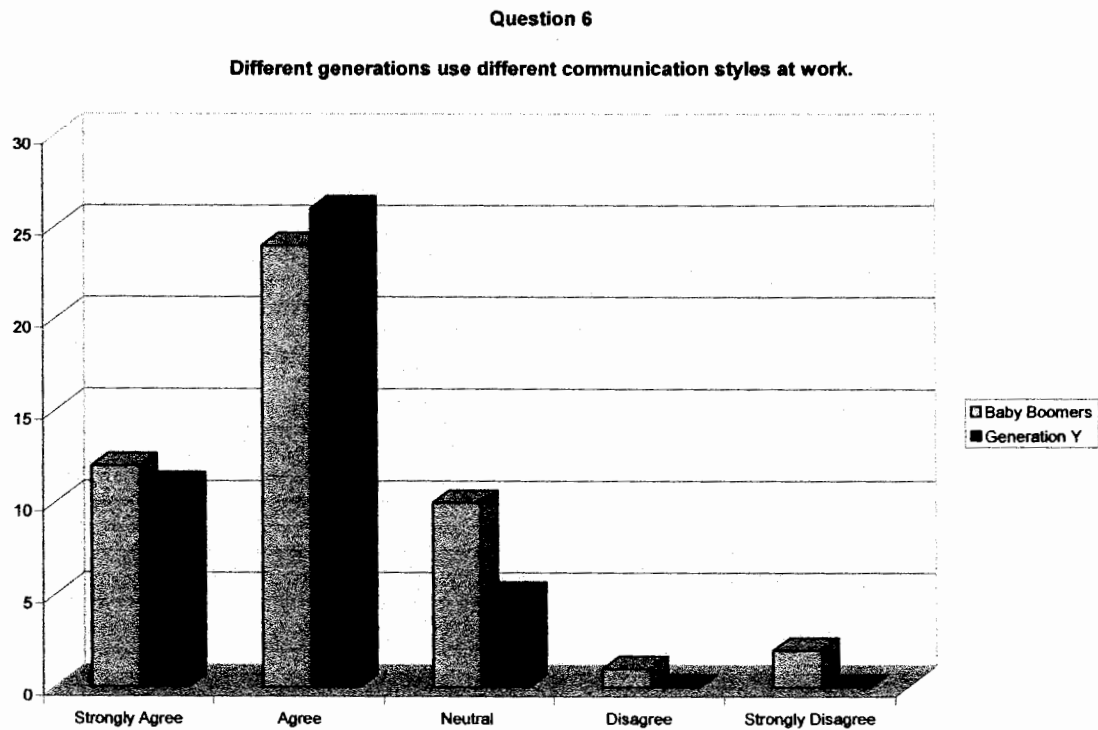
**Figure 2.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	0	1	1	14	33
Generation Y	0	1	2	25	14

The majority of respondents disagreed with this statement; 29% of the Baby Boomers disagreed and 67% strongly disagreed. For Generation Y, 59% of the respondents disagreed and 33% strongly disagreed. Two percent of the Baby Boomers agreed and an additional 2% registered a neutral response. Similarly, two percent of the Generation Y respondents agreed and 5% indicated they were neutral. None of the respondents from either group strongly agreed.

Question 5 was asked to gauge if people's behaviors at work were affected by age.

Sometimes people will make a conscious or subconscious decision to avoid people because of differences of opinions, personal styles, race, gender, religion or ethnicity. Again, nearly all respondents said they do not avoid others when considering age as the only factor.



**Figure 3.**

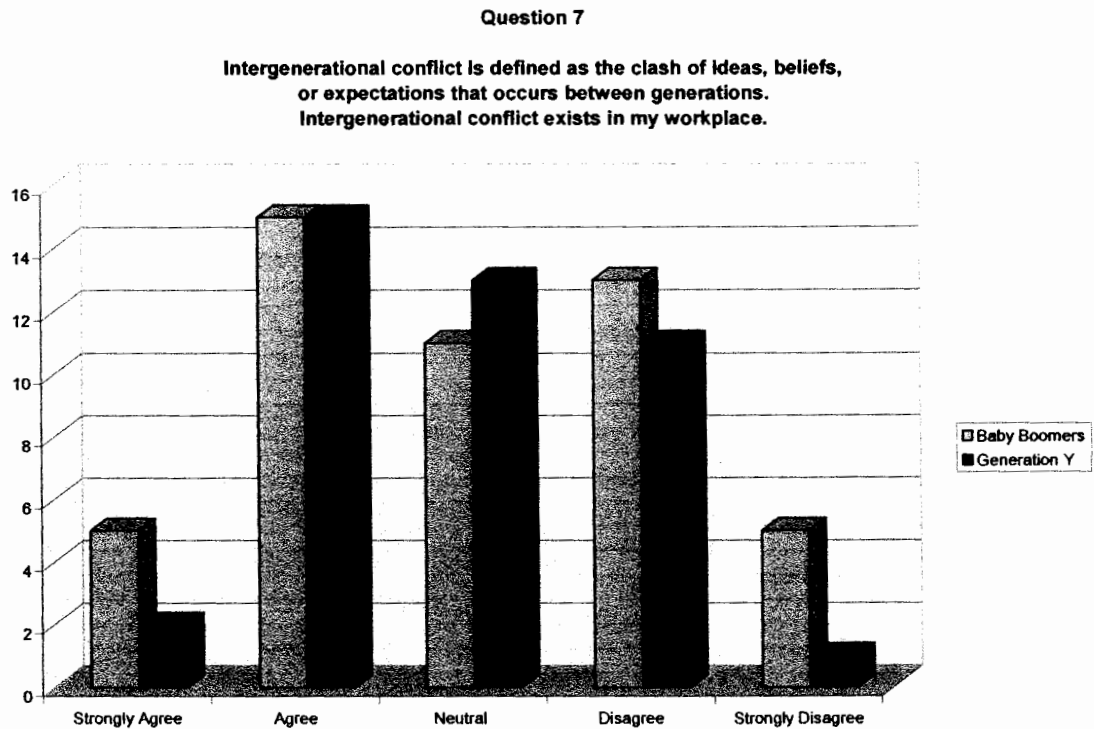
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	12	24	10	1	2
Generation Y	11	26	5	0	0



Question 6 found most respondents in agreement. Twenty four percent of Baby Boomers strongly agreed and 49% agreed. In the Generation Y group, 26% of the respondents strongly agreed and 62% agreed with the statement. The agree or strongly agree choices were chosen by at least three-quarters of the respondents from both groups.

Twenty percent of the Baby Boomers said they were neutral on the subject; 2% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed. Twelve percent of Generation Y participants felt neutral, while none responded disagree or strongly disagree. Question 6 tried to determine if the respondents were aware that people may communicate differently in the workplace based on their ages.

So far, a majority of the respondents reported that they engage in intergenerational communication at work and do not shy away from it. They also recognize that people of different ages will use different styles of communication. The next questions will delve further into the respondents' preferences and behaviors.

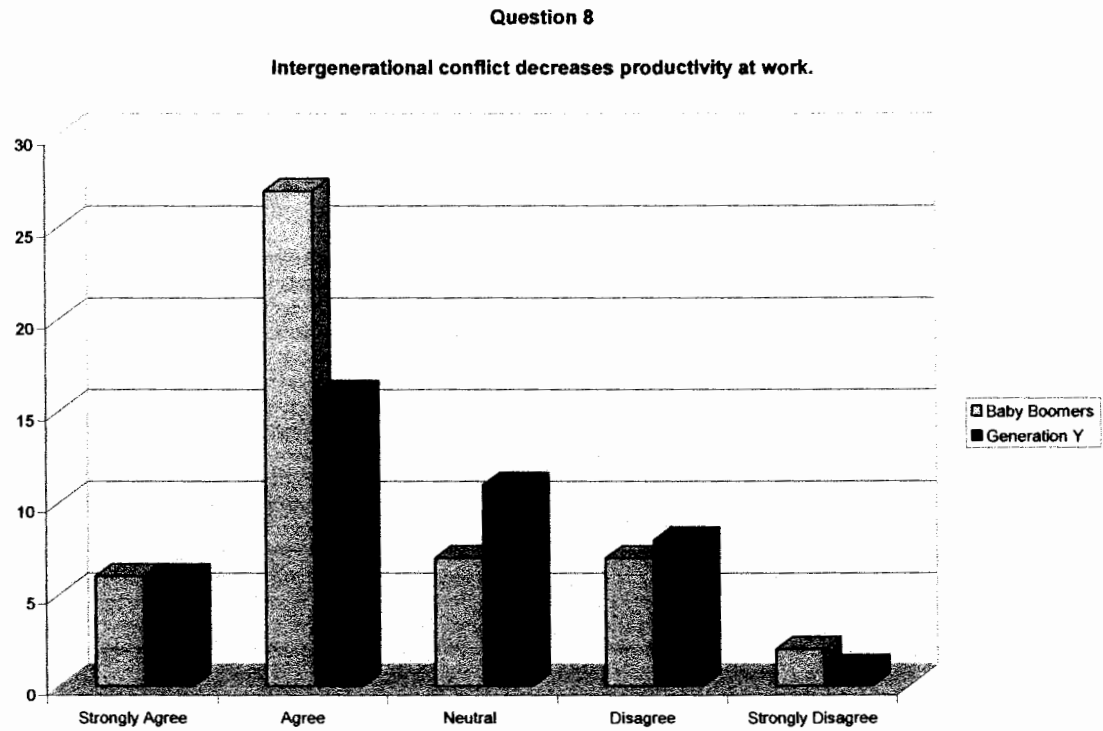


**Figure 4.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	5	15	11	13	5
Generation Y	2	15	13	11	1

The respondents were split on Question 7, but not by age group. A fairly equal amount from each group agreed and disagreed with the statement. For the Baby Boomers, 10% strongly agreed; 31% agreed; 22% were neutral; 27% disagreed; and 10% strongly disagreed. Generation Y respondents indicated that 5% strongly agreed; 36% agreed; 31% were neutral; 26% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed.

A majority of respondents noted they worked with people from different generations and felt comfortable working with people from different generations (Questions 4 and 5), and a majority thought that different generations used different ways to communicate (Question 6). So it was interesting to note the response to Question 7 did not lean strongly toward disagreeing with the statement and therefore declaring that intergenerational communication conflict does not exist at their workplace. One possible answer is that conflict exists, but the survey respondents do not see themselves involved in it. Also, many seem undecided, as nearly a quarter of the Baby Boomers and a third of Generation Y respondents registered a neutral response.



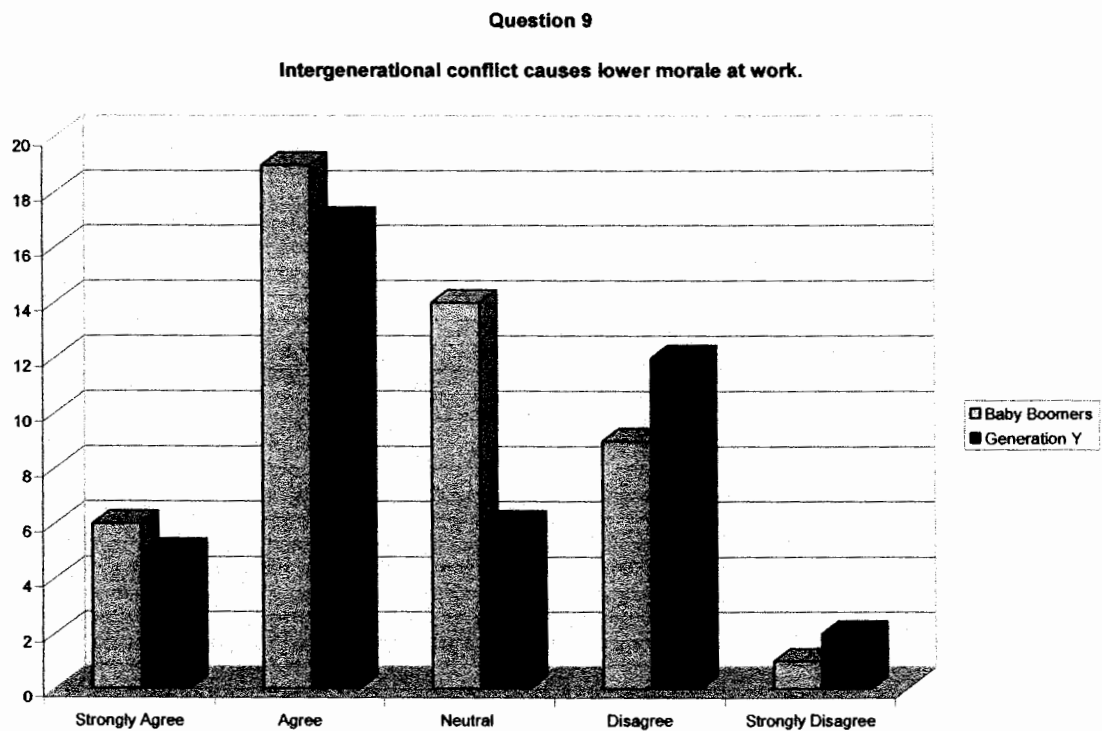
**Figure 5.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	6	27	7	7	2
Generation Y	6	16	11	8	1

Most of the Baby Boomers who answered this question agreed, with 55% of respondents falling into this category. Twelve percent of Boomers indicated they strongly agreed with the statement; 14% were neutral, 14% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed.

Generation Y respondents were a bit more split, and there were more neutral responses from them, with 26%. However, 14% of Generation Yers strongly agreed with the statement, 38% agreed, 19% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed.

Sixty seven percent of the Baby Boomers fell into the agree or strongly agree categories, compared to 52% percent for Generation Y. Also, a higher percentage of Generation Yers either disagreed or strongly disagreed compared to Baby Boomers, 21% and 18% respectively.



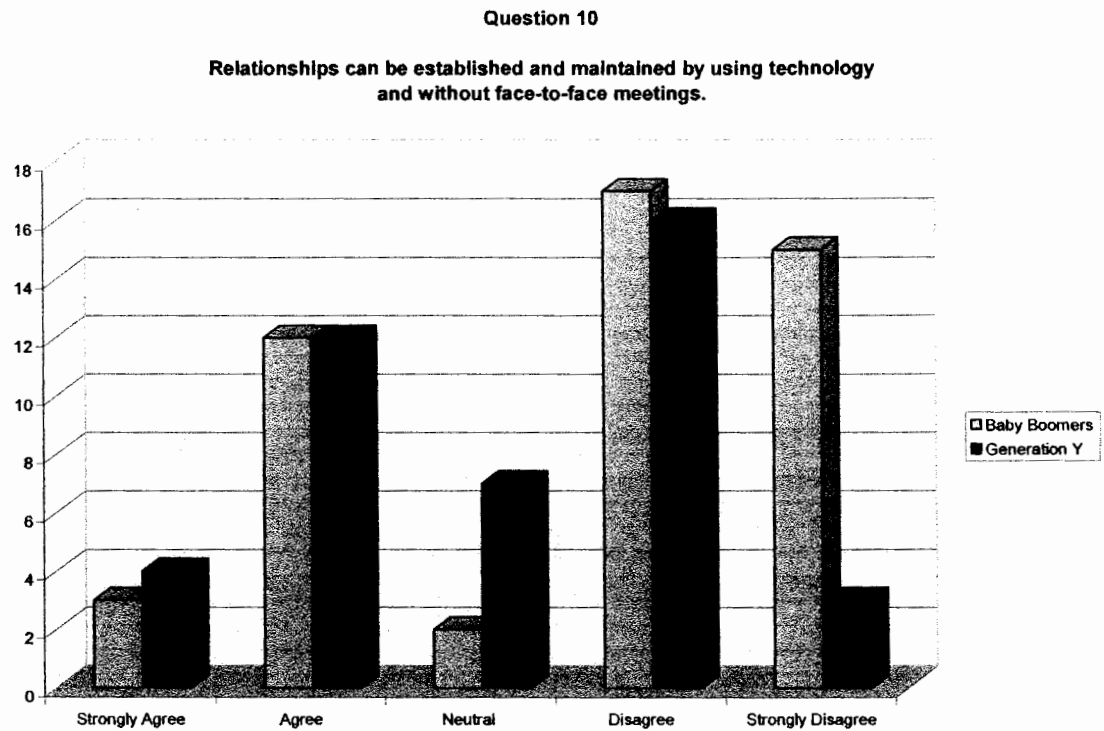
**Figure 6.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	6	19	14	9	1
Generation Y	5	17	6	12	2

Among the Baby Boomer respondents, 12% strongly agreed, 39% agreed, 29% were neutral, 18% disagreed and 2% strongly agreed.

The Generation Y respondents indicated that 12% strongly agreed, 40% agreed, 14% were neutral, 29% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed.

Slightly more than half of the Boomers and half of Generation Y either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement; the Boomers registered a significantly larger number for a neutral stance. Nearly a third of the Generation Y respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.



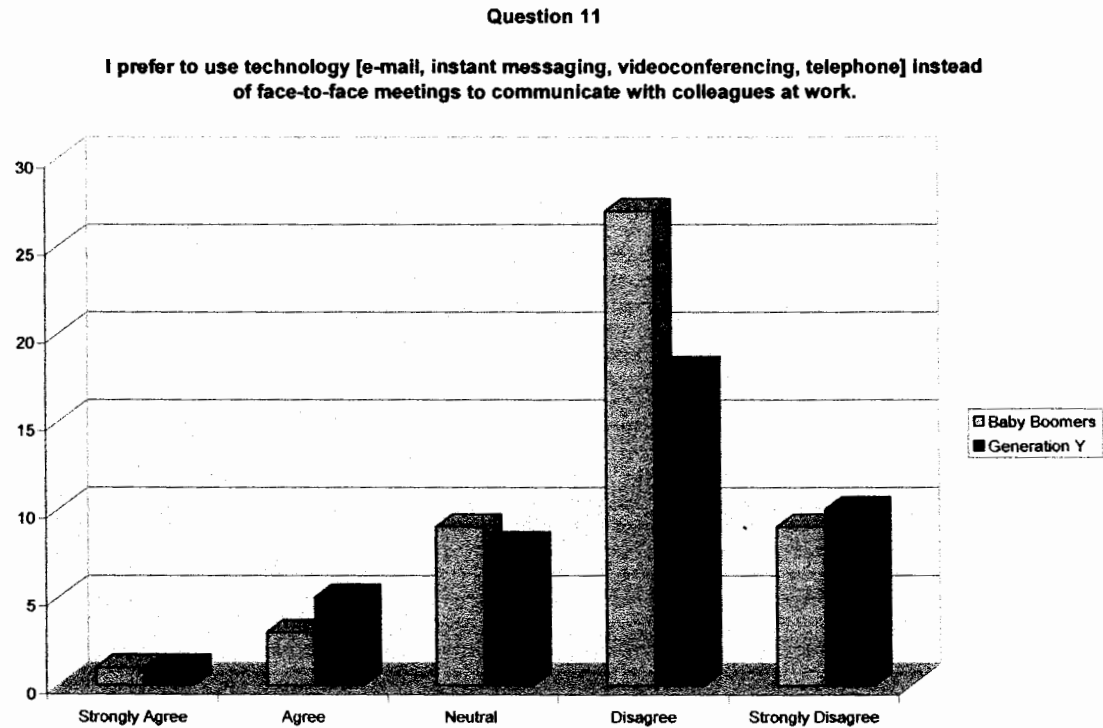
**Figure 7.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	3	12	2	17	15
Generation Y	4	12	7	16	3

A majority of the Baby Boomers disagreed with this statement; 31% strongly disagreed and 35% disagreed; only 4% were neutral. Twenty four percent of the Baby Boomers agreed and 6% strongly agreed. For respondents from Generation Y, 7% strongly disagreed, 38% disagreed, 16% were neutral, 29% agreed and 10% strongly agreed.

This question strongly divided the two groups: 66% of Baby Boomers either disagreed or strongly disagreed, while only 45% of Generation Y respondents registered similar feelings.

This issue will be examined more with Question 11.



**Figure 8.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	1	3	9	27	9
Generation Y	1	5	8	18	10

Nearly all the Baby Boomers had the same feelings on this question: 18% strongly disagreed; 55% disagreed; 18% were neutral and 6% agreed while 2% of the respondents



strongly agreed. The Generation Y respondents were slightly more mixed with 18% saying they strongly disagreed; 43% disagreed; 19% took a neutral position; while 12% agreed and 2% strongly agreed.

It is interesting to note that about a third of the respondents from both age groups agreed or strongly agreed with Question 10, that technology can be used to maintain relationships. But the question that followed it shows only 11% of all respondents prefer to put it into practice themselves.

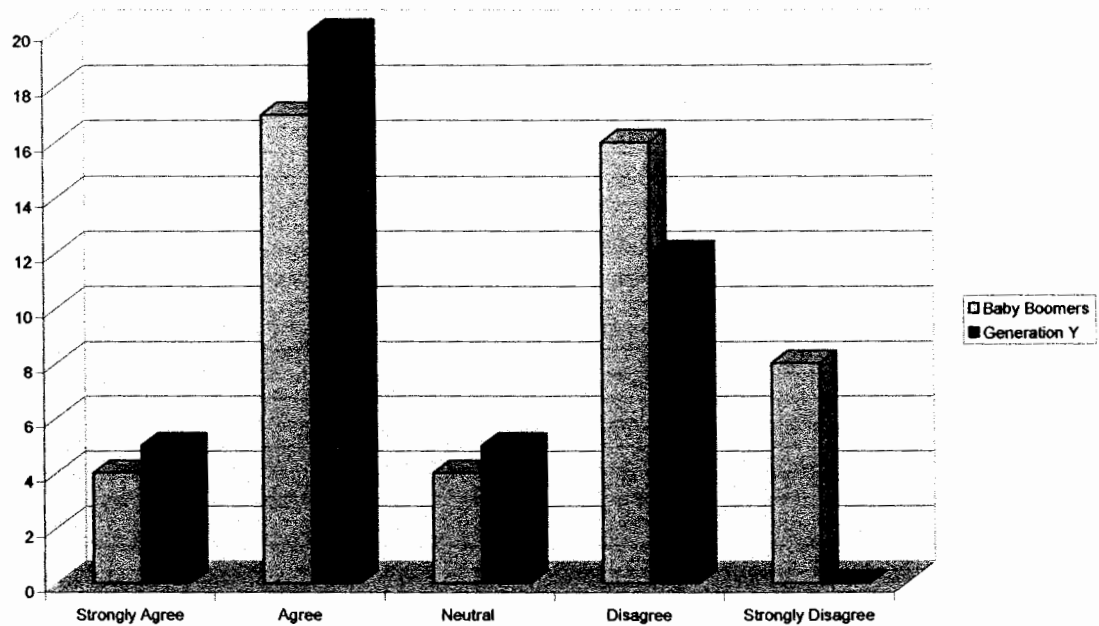
Also, 14% of the Gen Y respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, compared to 8% for the Baby Boomers.

The results for Generation Y do not support the research in the literature review, which reports that this younger generation is more likely than Baby Boomer managers to be comfortable with technology (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 136). Also, Pekala (2001) notes that Generation Yers live in a “real-time world,” and are comfortable using technology to break the barriers of time and space, elements needed to be in accordance with each other for a face-to-face meeting.

The fact that so many Baby Boomers disagreed with the statements supports Lancaster and Stillman’s (2002, p. 112) assertions that “Boomers used face-to-face opportunities as effective ways to boost a career. Leading meetings, making presentations, and dropping by the boss’s office were accepted ways of showcasing skills.”

## Question 12

A difference in age will affect how I communicate with another person at work.



**Figure 9.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	4	17	4	16	8
Generation Y	5	20	5	12	0

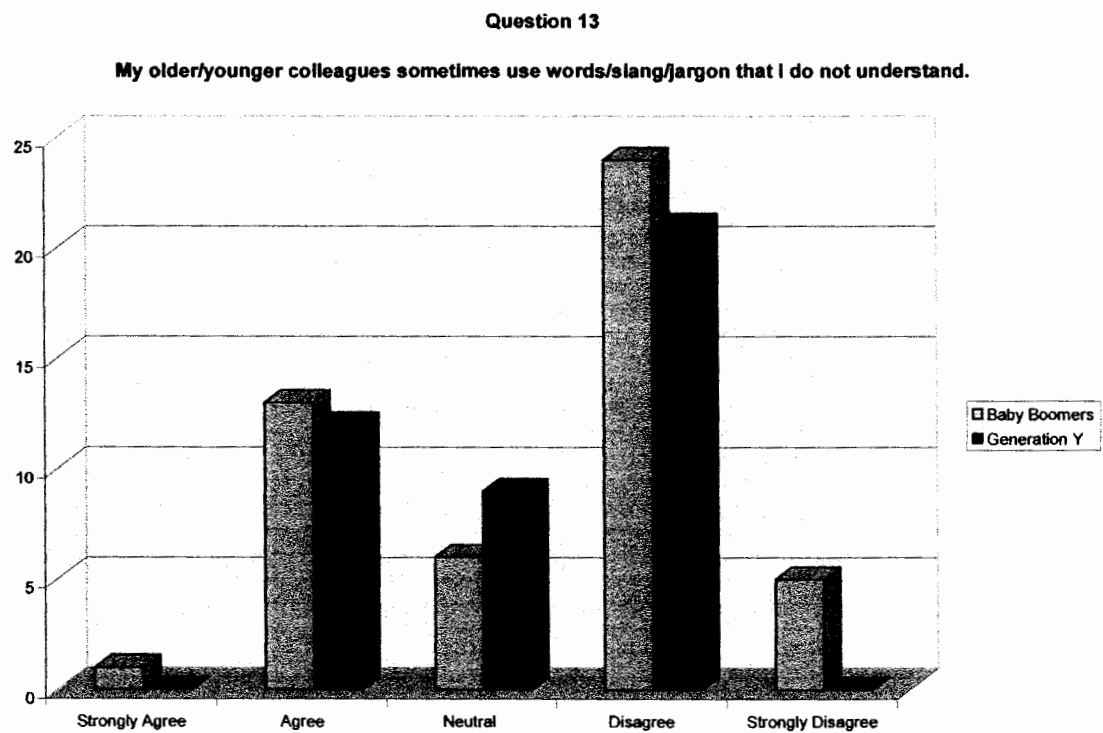
This essentially asks the respondents the research question: “Does age affect how Baby Boomers and Generation Y communicate in the workplace?”

The Baby Boomer respondents indicated that 8% strongly agreed; 35% agreed; 8% were neutral; 33% disagreed and 16% strongly disagreed. The Generation Y totals found that 12% strongly agreed; 48% agreed; 12% were neutral; 29% disagreed and none strongly disagreed.

A review of all the respondents finds that 50% will alter their communication patterns based on age; 40% said they would not.

When analyzed by age group, 60% of Generation Y respondents said they would change their behavior based on a difference in age, while only 43% of Baby Boomers said they would.

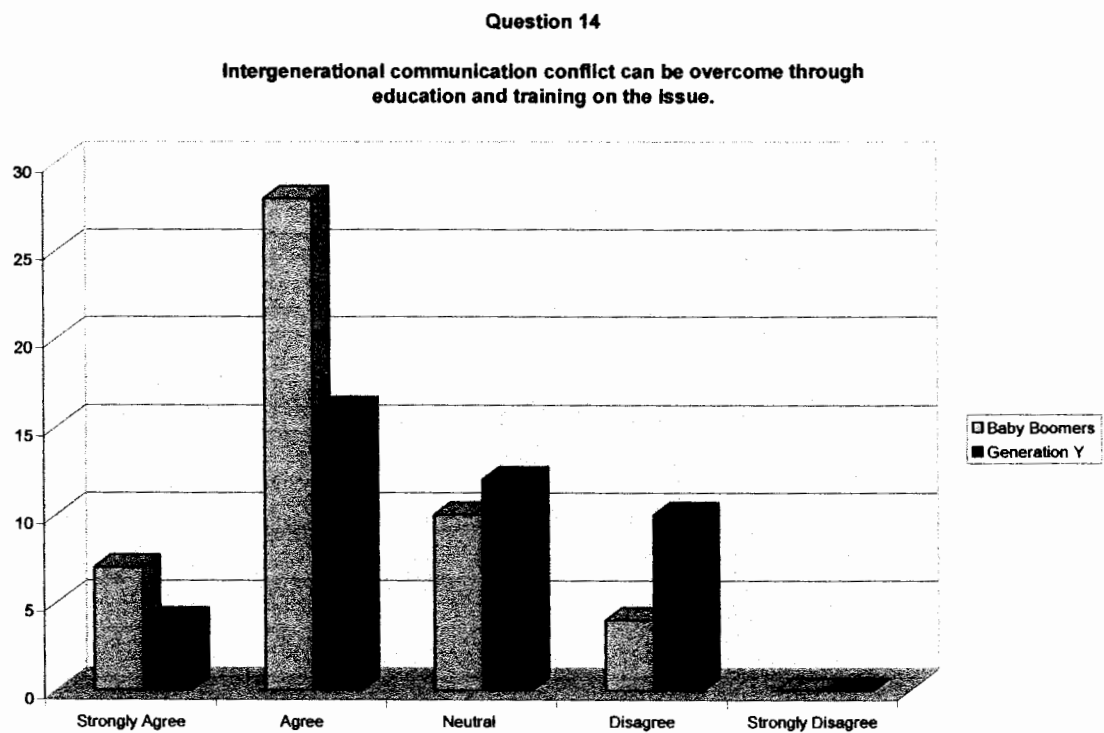
Ten percent of all respondents were neutral on the subject.



**Figure 10.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	1	13	6	24	5
Generation Y	0	12	9	21	0

Most of the respondents from both groups disagreed with this statement. For the Baby Boomers, 10% strongly disagreed; 49% disagreed; 12% were neutral; 27% agreed and 2% strongly agreed. The Generation Y participants indicated that half disagreed with the statement, 21% were neutral, and 29% agreed. No Generation Y respondents strongly agreed or strongly disagreed.



**Figure 11.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Baby Boomers	7	28	10	4	0
Generation Y	4	16	12	10	0

Question 14 relates to Subsidiary Question 2: “If differences in communication styles and preferences exist, how can managers effectively unite the generations for positive interactions in the workplace?” Could managers offer training to help bridge any gaps?

Fourteen percent of the Baby Boomers found that they strongly agreed with this statement; 57% agreed; 20% were neutral; 8% disagreed and none strongly disagreed.

Generation Y respondents were a bit more split in their responses: 10% strongly agreed; 38% agreed; 29% were neutral; and 24% disagreed. Similar to the Baby Boomers, none strongly disagreed.

The disparity in the groups is evident: 71% of the Baby Boomers agreed or strongly agreed, while less than half, at 48%, of Generation Y respondents did.

The results show that the Baby Boomers see education as a way to help with conflict, while Generation Y leans toward a more pessimistic view of what education on the topic can accomplish.

The literature on Generation Y indicates that they are optimistic, will work to achieve success and look to overcome obstacles. That contrasts with the results of this survey question, which indicate that nearly a quarter of the Generation Y respondents feel that education would not help resolve intergenerational conflict.

## Question 15

My company has programs or resources to address intergenerational conflict in our workplace.

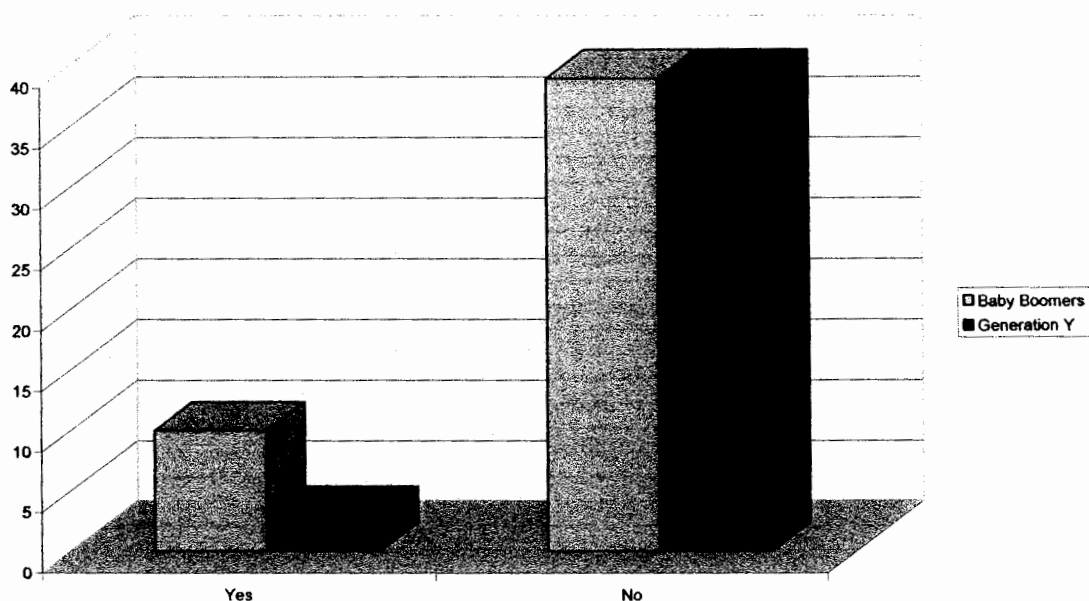


Figure 12.

	Yes	No
Baby Boomers	10	39
Generation Y	3	39

Twenty percent of Baby Boomers and 7% of Generation Y answered yes. Eighty percent of Baby Boomers and 93% of Generation Y respondents answered no.

More than half of the respondents to Question 14 either agreed or strongly agreed that education could help resolve the issues surrounding intergenerational conflict at work, but 86% of all respondents said that their workplaces do not have any resources in place to address them.

## Question 16

How could your company help create more positive intergenerational communication?

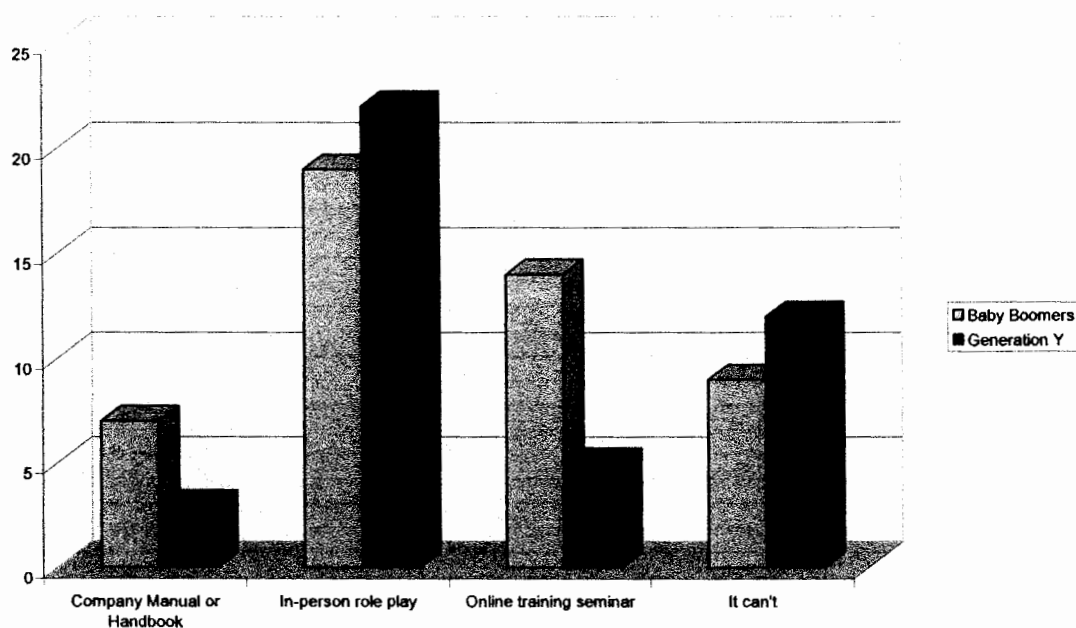


Figure 13.

	Company Manual	Role Play	Online training	It can't
Baby Boomers	7	19	14	9
Generation Y	3	22	5	12

For the Baby Boomers, 14% chose a company manual or handbook; 39% chose in-person role play; 29% chose an online training seminar; and 18% said the company can't create more positive communication. Of the Generation Y group, 7% selected a company manual or handbook; 52% selected in-person role play; 12% chose an online training seminar; and 29% said their company can't improve communication.

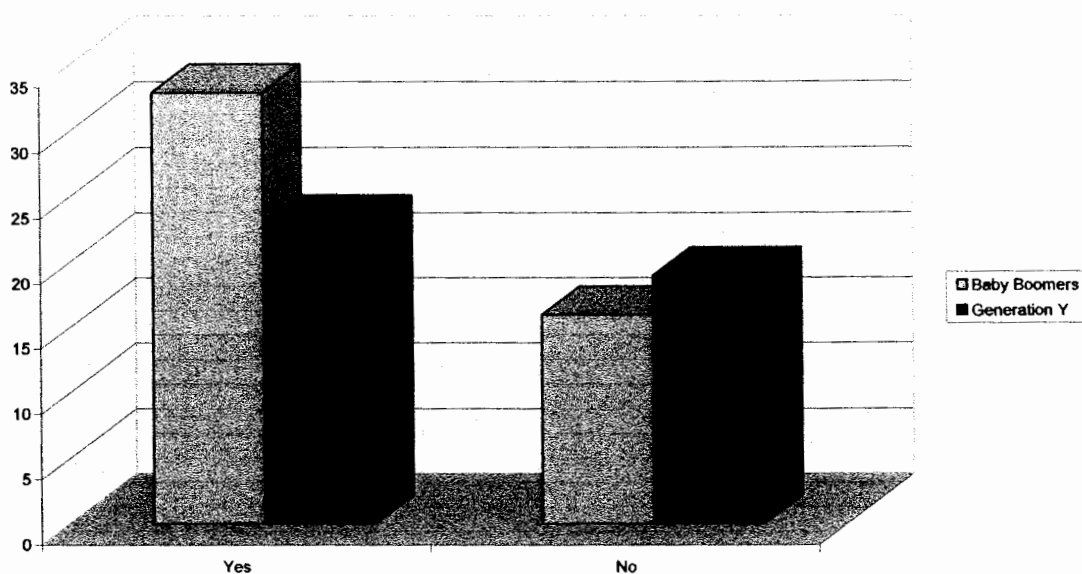
The Baby Boomers' preference for the in-person role play option is consistent with research that says they prefer face time with managers and colleagues in the office (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002, p. 112).

However, the fact that more than a quarter of Generation Y respondents would indicate that their company can't do anything to help with intergenerational communication conflicts is not supported by research in the literature review, which notes, "this new wave of workers is optimistic about the future...they combine the teamwork ethic of the Boomers with the can-do attitude of the Veterans and the technological savvy of the Xers" (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 143). It was noted that Generation Y would have a lifetime love of learning and would look to overcome challenges in their lives and at work.



## Question 17

If my company offered it, I would take a class in intergenerational communication issues to help me better understand others' perspectives.



**Figure 14.**

	Yes	No
Baby Boomers	33	16
Generation Y	23	19

Sixty seven percent of the Baby Boomers answered yes to this statement; 33% replied no. The Generation Y respondents had 55% reply yes and 45% reply no.

The fact that such a high percentage of Generation Y showed no interest in training classes on the subject conflicts with the research on their attitudes and outlooks. Zemke, et al. (2000, p. 144) found that Generation Y “will be the best educated generation ever, and they will probably continue into adulthood to keep up with rapidly changing technology.” It appears that

these survey respondents do not share the eagerness to continue learning and the natural curiosity that the researchers found.

Question 8 asked if respondents felt that intergenerational communication conflict decreased productivity at work; 60% either agreed or strongly agreed. Question 9 asked if respondents thought that intergenerational communication conflict caused lower morale at work; 52% either agreed or strongly agreed. These are both negative effects for a workplace.

Question 15 found that over half the respondents thought that education could help employees overcome intergenerational communication conflict in the workplace.

Even so, 38% of the replies for Question 17 said they would not take a class on intergenerational communication if their company offered it.

### **Summary of Survey Results**

The survey results were often supported by the existing research presented in Chapter 2, with some exceptions.

For the most part, the respondents recognized that communication patterns could vary among people from different age groups; intergeneration communication conflict can have negative effects on the workplace in terms of productivity and morale; and that conflict may be overcome through education and training on the issue.

A few of the discrepancies were related to Generation Y respondents, particularly in the areas of using technology to communicate and taking classes to educate them on intergenerational communication conflict. Generation Y participants registered negative responses for those questions. The literature on the subject found that Generation Y would react positively to using technology at work, would seek learning opportunities, and be optimistic about overcoming obstacles, communication or otherwise.

The author noted that there were several questions where the two groups split on their opinions: if intergenerational communication conflict decreased productivity, the role of technology in establishing and maintaining relationships, and if they prefer to use technology instead of in-person meetings.

The survey found that 80% of all respondents agreed that different generations use different communication styles at work. Later, the statement “A difference in age will affect how I communicate with another person at work” found that only half of all respondents said age would affect their communication styles, while 40% said they would not. It is interesting to note that more of the younger Gen Yers (60%) would change their behavior, while only 43% of their Baby Boomer colleagues (and likely managers) said they would.

In addition to the category of age, the survey responses were also cross-tabulated according to gender and education level; however, no significant results were observed as related to this study.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This study sought to answer the research question “Does age affect how Baby Boomers and Generation Y communicate in the workplace?” The author posited that it does.

Based on the results of the study, the author believes that the hypothesis holds true. The question “Different generations use different communication styles at work” found that 80% of all respondents agreed (See Figure 3). In addition, a majority of participants indicated that they personally would alter their communication patterns based on age (See Figure 9). This outcome is consistent with the body of research that exists in this specific area of communication study.

The subsidiary questions were also answered through the survey results. The first subsidiary question asked “What effects, if any, would differences in communication styles and preferences have on interpersonal relationships in the workplace?” The results found that while a majority of respondents would not avoid someone who was a different age, intergenerational communication conflict was a cause of decreased productivity and lower morale at work (See Figures 2, 5, 6).

The literature review in Chapter II revealed that technology would play a major role in communication styles in the workplace. However, most of the survey respondents agreed that using technology was not the preferred way to engage in interpersonal relationships. This was true for both Baby Boomers and for Generation Y subjects (See Figures 7 and 8).

The question about the actual spoken words that the two groups used at work indicated that a majority of subjects understood what their colleagues outside of their own age groups were saying; more than half of Generation Yers and nearly 60% of the Baby Boomers said it was not a problem. Yet, there are still some that reported they do not understand some of the slang or

jargon that other age groups use (See Figure 10). Though those respondents were in the minority for this study, managers should be aware that disparities exist in order to make even more inroads in improving the communication in their workplaces.

The second subsidiary question asked “If differences in communication styles and preferences exist, how can managers effectively unite the generations for positive interactions in the workplace?” The survey did establish that different styles and preferences do, in fact, exist. The next part of this subsidiary question was addressed in several sections of the survey.

The subjects were asked if intergenerational conflict exists in their workplaces; 41% of them said it did. While this is not a majority, 26% said they were neutral on the subject (See Figure 4). It could take just one encounter for them to see that it does exist. This is relevant for managers who need to be aware that their employees recognize and possibly experience conflicts exist. Managers will need to determine what their role should be for promoting better communication.

Some questions dealt specifically with training and education on the topic of intergenerational communication. The results showed that 60% of all respondents believed that education and training would help overcome conflict (See Figure 11) and that 62% would take a class on the topic if their company offered it (See Figure 17). However, in a later question, 86% of the participants reported that their organizations do not have any programs in place on this topic (See Figure 12).

The Baby Boomer and Generation Y subjects were given choices as to how their organizations might help create more positive intergenerational communication. Twenty three percent of all respondents said that their companies could not (See Figure 13). If 60% of respondents thought that intergenerational communication conflict decreased productivity (See

Figure 5) and 51% thought that it decreased morale at work (See Figure 6), it will be a challenge for managers to reach out to those who don't think their companies can do anything to combat the negative effects of this conflict.

### **Implications for Organizations**

As the literature review and survey results indicated, communication conflicts can arise among workers in different age groups. These conflicts can have repercussions for an organization productivity and success.

One question organizations should consider is if and how they might classify age as part of the broader diversity category that often includes race ethnicity, religion, gender, socio-economic status, education level, or physical or mental disabilities. If organizations offered diversity training, they could include differences in age as part of the learning experience.

It is evident from the existing research and the results of this study that education is an important issue in addressing intergenerational communication conflict. Most of the respondents, both Baby Boomer and Generation Yers, preferred the in-person role play option for training. This gives Baby Boomers the face time in the office they prefer and also the mentoring that Generation Yers seek as they start out their careers. Communication skills will be needed in 2006, as they will be needed in 2010 and 2020 and beyond. It's not a fad or a trend—as long as people need to work together on projects, communication will play a vital role. Employees are looking for opportunities to improve their skills and value in their workplaces. For these reasons, organizations need to implement intergenerational communication skills training as part of their professional growth offerings for employees.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study examined workplace communication of two specific groups, the Baby Boomers and Generation Y, and only inquired about communication patterns based on age. Future research could include all groups that are in the workforce, the Veterans Generation and Generation X, and as well as future generations.

The survey and existing research use generalizations as they seek to establish patterns of behavior and preferences. But other areas to consider for future research on this topic can include how communication at work is influenced by these additional elements: the participants' personal upbringing and their families' outlook on the role and responsibility of work; the job titles of the respondents; and how long they have been in the workforce.

The author created cross-tabulations of the survey data based on the respondents' ages and genders but did not include them in the final analysis. However, there is a large body of research on gender communication, and certainly future studies could include a review of relevant literature and surveys that account for age and gender. The same could be said for the education levels of the survey participants, and their economic status.

The participants' cultures present another angle to consider in future studies. This research paper did not ask for participants' race/ethnic backgrounds, as it would have introduced more variables to the results. However, culture plays a major role in the communication styles, patterns, preferences and even rules. Future studies could not only ask for the participants' backgrounds, but survey them about diversity in their workplaces, their experience and their comfort levels for working with multicultural teams.

This study focused on workplaces in the United States. It could be expanded to include foreign countries and organizations, virtual workplaces and expatriate work experiences.

Another consideration for future researchers would be to closely examine the industries that participants work in. The expectations, goals, and attitudes may differ among groups that work in financial services, schools, hospitals, hotels, construction sites, retail stores and the like.

The author used a quantitative approach to for research purposes. Another method to use would be acquiring strictly qualitative data, relying solely on interviews to gather anecdotes and personal experiences to compare to the existing research presented in the literature review.

This study examined the opinions of 91 participants; a larger pool of respondents could give future researchers more insights into this field of study.

Looking back on the completed survey, the process of gathering necessary data would have been more efficient if the survey was presented differently. It would have been better to eliminate the Veterans Generation and the Generation X responses at the beginning instead of at the end, at which point all of their responses were included in the spreadsheets and cross-tabulations provided by Zoomerang. Ideally, the first question would have determined if the author needed their data based on their selection of age category. If the age selected did not fit the criteria for relevant data, they survey would be finished at that early point. Also, if any Baby Boomers or Generation Yers indicated they did not have 6 months of work experience, the survey would have stopped at that point instead of allowing them to continue on.

The online survey service that the author used, Zoomerang, indicates that it broke down “completes, partials and other responses,” however, when the data was downloaded Zoomerang into an Excel sheet, there were several additional incomplete surveys. Therefore, the data that Zoomerang presented as “complete” was actually incorrect; for some reason the service did not account for a number of partial answers and included these figures in the final count. The author then had to remove the incomplete responses that Zoomerang missed. Zoomerang is a useful



tool, but in the future, users of this online service should be closely examine their data before relying on the sets provided by Zoomerang.

### **Conclusion**

As four generations with different backgrounds, behaviors, beliefs, preferences and goals continue to work together, communication conflict is inevitable. Researchers and subjects agree that intergenerational communication conflict exists, and many are seeking ways to improve it, as it has been shown to have real impact on their interpersonal relationships and, ultimately, the organizations in which they work.

Though some may argue that the older Veterans and Baby Boom Generations will be moving out of the workforce in the next decade and that these studies are not relevant, consider that the men and women of Generations X and Y will be the leaders one day, managing a yet-to-be-named new generation of workers. And as the world changes at an ever faster rate, the Xers and Yers, like the Veterans and Boomers before them, will most likely find themselves one day questioning what their younger employees believe, strive for, and how they talk and interact with others.

Therefore, though the studies on how Baby Boomers and Generation Y communicate may end up collecting dust on library or virtual bookshelves 10 or 20 years from now, the larger topic of intergenerational communication will not just fade away. As long as there are organizations that need people to work with each other and complete tasks, this particular topic, and communication studies in general, will be relevant and valuable.

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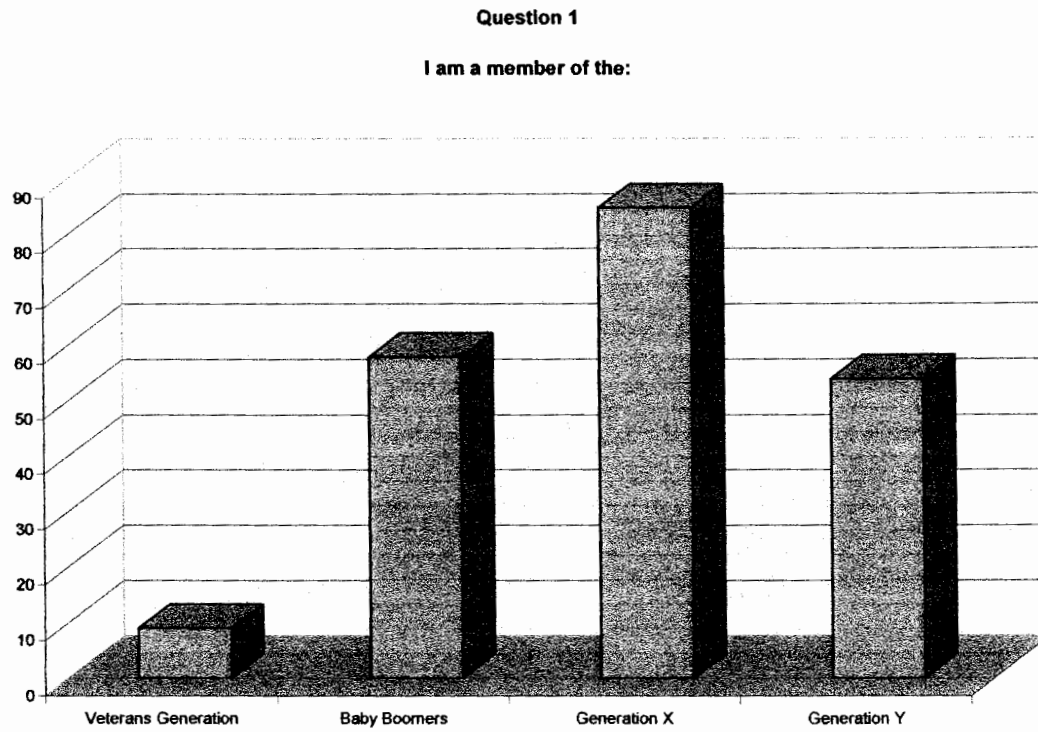
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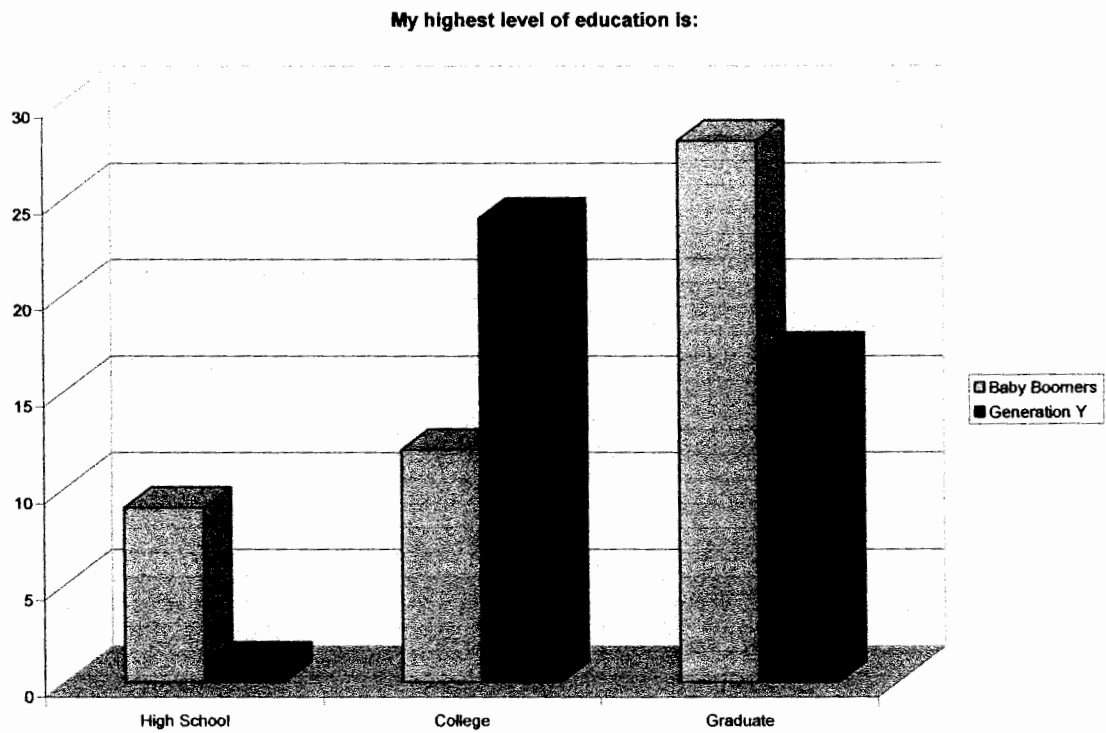
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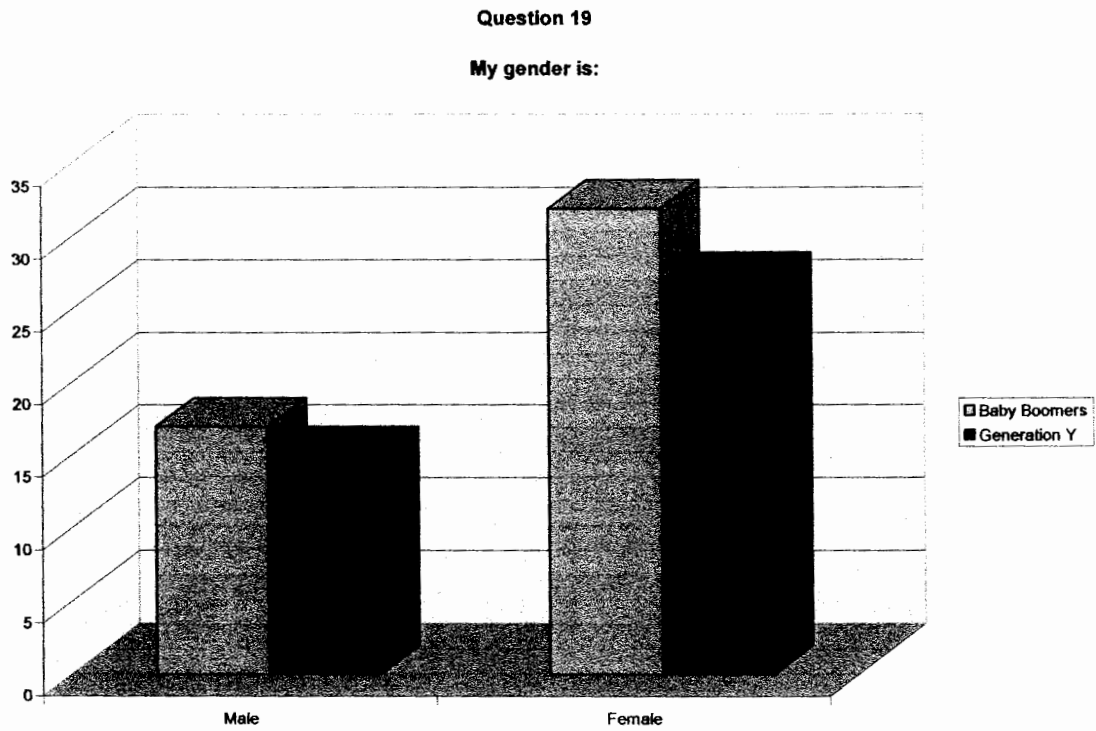
## Appendix A

### Survey Figures: Demographic Questions

Figure 15.



**Figure 16.**

**Figure 17.**

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Letter of Solicitation**

The following letter was included in e-mail messages sent to participants and was also the “Introduction” page on survey web site hosted by Zoomerang.

January 20, 2006

These surveys are being conducted as a component of thesis work toward the completion of a Master of Arts degree in Corporate and Public Communication at Seton Hall University.

The purpose of it is to assess and communication styles and preferences of Baby Boomers and Generation Y in the workplace.

This web-based survey will be accessible through Zoomerang, an online survey company (<http://info.zoomerang.com>).

The survey will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

All responses are anonymous and will remain strictly confidential. Your participation is voluntary.

If you would like to receive a copy of the final project, please email [leemelis@shu.edu](mailto:leemelis@shu.edu).

Thank you for your participation.

Melissa Lee  
[leemelis@shu.edu](mailto:leemelis@shu.edu)



**Intergenerational conflict decreases productivity at work.**

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

**Intergenerational conflict causes lower morale at work.**

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

**Relationships can be established and maintained by using technology and without face-to-face meetings.**

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

**I prefer to use technology [e-mail, instant messaging, videoconferencing, telephone] instead of face-to-face meetings to communicate with colleagues at work.**

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

**A difference in age will affect how I communicate with another person at work.**

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

**My older/younger colleagues sometimes use words/slang/jargon that I do not understand.**

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

**Intergenerational communication conflict can be overcome through education and training on the issue.**

☐ Strongly Agree   ☐ Agree   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Strongly Disagree

**My company has programs or resources to address intergenerational conflict in our workplace.**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

**How could your company help create more positive intergenerational communication? (check one)**